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STUDIES IN THE IDYLLS.



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STUDIES IN THE IDYLLS

AN ESSAY ON MR. TENNYSON'S

"IDYLLS OF THE KING"

BY

HENRY ELSDALE



HENRY S. KING AND CO., LONDON

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PREFACE.



STUDY of the "Idylls of the King," which served originally to occupy the author's leisure hours when confined to the house from the effects of an accident, has resulted in the present volume.

Not being, therefore, at first designed for publication, the work was not undertaken in any formal manner such as would involve a discussion of, and proper references to, any existing authorities on the subject.

At the same time many most valuable hints have been derived from the writings of others, as from articles which have from time to time appeared in Reviews and Magazines.

Before sending this essay to the press, a careful attempt has been made to recover, and give references to, any such prior publications, to which an acknow-

ledgment is due, or which might be interesting^o to the reader, as throwing light upon the subject generally.

It is, however, difficult to regain passages derived from fugitive and perishable sources when once they have been lost sight of. Should any such acknowledgment still be lacking, the author trusts that the omission will, therefore, be excused and accepted as unintentional.





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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

IT will hardly be denied by anyone that all complex creations, whether of art or nature, require to be regarded from two points of view, the distant as well as the near, in order that a right judgment may be arrived at concerning them.

No detailed study of each different tree, of fern, of heath, of grass, or of deer, will enable us to appreciate the merits of a fine piece of park scenery, with its green sward, its massy groves, its glancing vistas, its random and varied woodland effects. And no careful examination of statue, of moulding, of tracery, or of every variety of architectural detail, will give us any true idea of the general effect of some richly-ornamented porch of a French Gothic Cathedral, say. But, nowhere, unless we are acquainted with the

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Details, shall we enter fully into the true meaning and purpose of the general picture. And, conversely, without a knowledge of the general picture, we are unable to form any correct measure of the true proportions, and real scope and effect, of the various component elements.

This essay may be regarded as an attempt to apply these principles to the Idylls of the King. Mr. Tennyson has given to the world ten poems, so named. They have come before us piecemeal in an irregular and fragmentary manner. The four first written Idylls, with which we are most familiar, comprise some of the latest in order in the series. And the first poem of all is one of the latest published. Consequently, if we are to obtain any proper appreciation of the true bearing and proportions, and the real merits of the entire series as a single work of art, we must peruse all the poems afresh, in their proper order, with an eye to their general effect and due correlation.

And this more general view and widening of our horizon will tend to give us a better insight, in its turn, into the details of the poems, which, in many cases, will be lighted up with new meaning when set in their proper place in the picture, so that the contrasted lights and shadows may have fair play, in accordance with the poet's design.

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ever interesting and important such questions may be with a view to a right measure of his probable influence for good or for evil, as a guide and teacher of men. Were we examining the "In Memoriam," say, we could hardly avoid asking how far Mr. Tennyson is identified with any school of philosophy; and whether his opinions, instead of being fixed, definite, and consistent, are not rather vague, uncertain and fragmentary. And, in religion, we should have to inquire whether he appears to stand upon firm ground based upon a settled and clearly defined faith in a Christianity which claims, and has always claimed, to provide a firm rock for the soul of man to rest upon: or whether there be any indications in his poems that he is not altogether without a leaning, here as elsewhere, to the spirit of the age, in a vain and hopeless attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable,—to find some compromise or nicely adjusted medium, that is, between an objective revelation on the one side, and a straightforward rationalism on the other. But these vital questions are not perhaps fairly raised by anything in the Idylls; and we shall therefore be enabled to steer clear of them.

Returning now to our proper subject, and proposed method of dealing with it, let us first take a rapid survey of each Idyll in detail, noting, as we pass, such points as, belonging more properly to the Idyll in

question, may seem to require attention, and then let us examine the whole from a more general standpoint, as a single work of art.

This examination will tend to bring fairly before us the lofty and noble purpose which underlies the whole work, and its essential unity, so that the various poems are but the different acts in one great drama. It will show us the artistic agreement and harmony between the action and progress of this drama, in the successive poems, and the attendant scenes and operations of outward nature. These again will be seen to be influenced by those changes of time, season, and weather, which the progressively unfolding cycle of a single complete year will bring before us, side by side with the progressively unfolded action of the general drama.

In order that the poet may have fair play, and that we may not seem to deal ungenerously with him, we will defer, until our first perusal of the poems is complete, any proper consideration of such defects and drawbacks as, in our judgment, may appear in the work.

We shall not fail to notice the allegorical significance which lies in many places beneath the surface of the poems; a due recognition of which will cause the details, and the poems themselves, to light up with a new and a higher meaning.

We shall discern, as we proceed, more and more clearly, that these Idylls constitute essentially one long study of *failure*. They bring before us that sad doom of vanity, of disappointment, of blighted promises and withered prospects which, here as elsewhere, is seen to await many bright hopes and noble enthusiasms. And they show us the secret of this failure, the dread working of that mystery of iniquity which mars and ruins the fairest of prospects. The Evil comes first ; but, following ever upon it, with slow and tardy, as it would appear, but certain and irresistible steps, we shall recognize the noiseless and stealthy tread of the avenging Nemesis of Retribution ; until we are made to confess that, herein, the modern poet is altogether at one with the ancient :—

Εὐδαίμονες οἷσι κακῶν ἀγευστος αἰών,
οἷς γὰρ ἂν σεισθῇ θεόθεν δόμος, ἅτας
οὐδὲν ἰλλεῖπει, γενεᾷς ἐπὶ πλῆθος ἔρπον¹

SOPH. *Ant.*

¹ The following is an attempt at an English translation :—

“ O happy they whose life is free from ill !
For let the gods but strike a house in wrath,
The haunting curse shall never leave that race.”



CHAPTER II.

THE COMING OF ARTHUR.

THE Idylls¹ generally consist of stories, specially selected, out of a great mass of such legendary materials, by the author, for the sake of the poetic and artistic advantages and capabilities which they may individually present, as well as for their bearing on the proper un-

¹ The term "idyll," or "idyl," as it seems to be more usually spelt, is generally applied, I think, much in the same way as its Greek prototype *ιδύλλιον*, according to Liddell and Scott's definition:—"a short, highly-wrought descriptive poem, mostly on pastoral subjects, as those of Theocritus, Bion, &c." The word would therefore be well suited to describe such poems as the "Miller's Daughter," or the "Gardener's Daughter," or it would be most legitimately applicable to the little shepherds' song, called "a low sweet idyll," which occurs near the end of the "Princess." But it is difficult to see how Mr. Tennyson can justify his use of it in the case of long connected pieces of a narrative character with an infusion of the dramatic and the epic, like these so-called "Idylls of the King."

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folding of his Arthurian subject. But this first poem is principally narrative and introductory in character, being designed to introduce King Arthur and Guinevere in due form upon the stage, and bring the story down to the point of their appearance thereon as man and wife, from which the proper course of the drama may be said to commence.

Hence it would scarcely be fair to expect, in this poem, that more lively interest and effect which may perhaps be looked for in the others.

Mr. Tennyson's conception of the perfect life for his ideal hero is set before us ere we have gone far in the poem :—

“ . . Saving I be join'd
To her that is the fairest under heaven,
I seem as nothing in the mighty world,
And cannot will my will, nor work my work
Wholly, nor make myself in mine own realm
Victor and lord. But were I join'd with her,
Then might we live together as one life,
And reigning with one will in everything,
Have power on this dark land to lighten it,
And power on this dead world to make it live.”

That is, no ideal standard, remote from the ordinary conditions of human life and apart from its happiness and its joy, is to be set up—no monastic or celibate existence, beyond the reach of ordinary humanity ;—

“Why should a man desire in any way
To vary from the kindly race of men?”

but it is in wedded happiness that that atmosphere is to be created, in which the highest ideal life of man is to grow and flourish. Compare the words of the marriage blessing:

"Reign ye, and live, and love, and make the world
Other, *and may thy queen be one with thee.*"

But here we get a glimpse of the "little rift within the lute, which by-and-by will make the music mute." For it is the design of the whole work to unfold before us, as the secret of Arthur's failure, the non-fulfilment of this last necessary condition, his oneness with his queen.

A marked feature in this poem is its hidden and allegorical reference. The poet has himself elsewhere told us, as if to take away any possible doubt upon the question, that the lifelong struggle of the king shadows forth "*sense at war with soul.*"

Here, in the different accounts of Arthur's birth, we see the way in which different minds confront the problem of the origin and true position of the soul.

"... There be those who hate him in their hearts,
Call him baseborn, and since his ways are sweet
And theirs are bestial, hold him less than man :"

These are they who serve the flesh rather than the spirit, whose attitude toward the higher and better service has always been, and will always be, one of slander and depreciation.

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"And there be those who deem him more than man,
And dream he dropt from heaven :"

These are, of course, the spiritually minded, as opposed to the materialist and the rationalist. Bedivere's own view, which he proceeds to unfold, is characteristic of the man, as we shall hereafter see. He is content with a blunt, honest, practical recognition of that which he *feels* to be right, he follows the path which conscience points out at the moment, and does not concern himself to require that it should *prove* its supernatural claims to his obedience. Thus he is the representative of a middle class, in between those who "call him baseborn" and those who "dream he dropt from heaven." The first-created knight, he is the man of practical and unquestioning obedience and loyalty,—

"... Bold in heart and act and word was he,
Whenever slander breathed against the king."

And, hereafter, we shall find him remaining faithful, "the last of all his knights," in the closing scene of all. But, even there, he will still display the same characteristics,—a dim and partial recognition of the higher aspects and true conditions of that obedience which he has all his life rendered.

The allegory appears again in the account of the coronation scene.

Thus the three fair Queens, who stand near the

throne of Arthur, 'evidently represent Faith, Hope, and Charity.

The rays of light falling around them from

" . . . The Cross

And those around it, and the Crucified,"

—show us the source from which all their own light and strength are derived. Mage Merlin, as we shall see better later on, represents the powers of intellect and imagination, of which the soul must make due use in its warfare.

The Lady of the Lake, clothed in the sacred white samite, and surrounded with a mist of incense, is Religion. She "knows a subtler magic" than Merlin, inasmuch as the spiritual is higher and deeper than the purely intellectual. She gives the king his sword Excalibur,—“whereby to drive the heathen out,”—which is, of course, the sword of the Spirit, wherewith the Soul is to wage war against Sin. The deep waters, with the eternal calm, wherein the Lady of the Lake dwells, and from which the nine-year-wrought sword rises, show us the source from which this spiritual weapon is to be derived. It is fashioned by no earthly hand, but must be sought, with the aid of Religion, by long communings with the Infinite and the Eternal. If we were to inquire into the appropriateness of the image of the deep untroubled waters, we should hardly be able to avoid a reference to the “sea

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of glass, like unto crystal," which is before the Throne in the Apocalypse,—assuming this to be generally interpreted as denoting water in absolute and unbroken repose. This attribute of serene repose, as ascribed to the divine or the pseudo-divine, has a powerful attraction for our poet. Compare a beautiful passage in "Lucretius :"—

"The Gods, who haunt
The lucid interspace of world and world,
Where never creeps a cloud, or moves a wind,
Nor ever falls the least white star of snow,
Nor ever lowest roll of thunder moans,
Nor sound of human sorrow mounts to mar
Their sacred everlasting calm !"

Excalibur has on one side—

"Graven in the oldest tongue of all this world,
'Take me,' but turn the blade and you shall see,
And written in the speech ye speak yourself,
'Cast me away !'"

I can only suppose this to mean, that there is a time to take the sword,—when the empire of the Spirit, as opposed to the Flesh, is set up within us,—and a time to throw it away, when our warfare is over. But that the arguments for taking the sword are to the natural, unenlightened men hard sayings, written in a language hard to be understood, although in essence one, presented to each soul from the earliest ages till now. Whereas the present inducements to throw away the

mod, and give up the struggle, are common, evident, and all-too-easily understood.

We notice, all through, that the poet has successfully maintained the proprieties of his allegorical significance, without at all obtruding this more hidden sense upon the reader's notice, so as to destroy or endanger the realism of the direct story.

The conduct of the two sons of Queen Bellicent is significant of their characters and future position in the general drama. Gawain, the giddy and impulsive boy, will develop into the reckless and pleasure-seeking but valiant knight; and Modred, who now listens at the door, will be the crafty traitor hereafter.

Queen Bellicent's account of Arthur's origin, in the bringing of the babe to Merlin's feet by a wave, is the poet's own addition to, or variation on, the old legends.

He probably thinks that, among such a number of vague and contradictory accounts as are to be found in them, a little extra variation will be of small consequence.

Let us now turn to Merlin's riddling triplets:—

"Rain, rain, and sun ! a rainbow in the sky !
A young man will be wiser by-and-by ;
An old man's wit may wander ere he die.

"Rain, rain, and sun ! a rainbow on the lea !
And truth is this to me, and that to thee ;
And truth or clothed or naked let it be.

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"Rain, sun, and rain ! and the free blossom blows :
Sun, rain, and sun ! and where is he who knows ?
From the great deep to the great deep he goes."

- We will give our interpretation of this and similar passages in the Idylls, not as presuming for one moment that the intelligent reader stands in need of any enlightenment which we can pretend to afford, but simply that he may compare notes, if so he please, as to the views which we may take of the same passage.

We might call this, then, the wizard-song of Arthur and his fortunes :—

"Rain, rain, and sun"—those fortunes will be conquered ; they will have many dark shadows, but will not be without their share of brightness and glory.

"A young man will be wiser by-and-by :—"

for Arthur must learn, by sad experience, that men are not so easily to be made from beasts, as in his enthusiastic youth he may fondly imagine.

"An old man's wit may wander ere he die."

Intellect—represented by Merlin—as apart from Religion, is not prepared easily to admit any supernatural theory of the origin of the soul. Maybe, says Merlin, this wonderful story is all a senile delusion of Bleys !

"Truth is this to me, and that to thee ;"

"to me, the seer, gifted with insight, and able to discern the hidden harmonies and real relations of things, truth is a *rainbow on the lea*,—a magic illuminating power, one in its source and essence, but diverse in its operation and effects, lighting up in one flood of varied yet harmonious colour all things, aye, even the everyday realities of this common world. But to you, who have no such extraordinary gifts, it is a *rainbow in the sky*,—the bright hope of the future rather than the realization of the present, for to you the present is shrouded in cloud and mystery, two parts of rain to one of sun."

"Truth or clothed or naked let it be—"

"let us have nothing but the truth, whether clothed in riddling triplets, as here, or openly expressed."

"Rain, sun, and rain ' and the free blossom blows "

'Tis the alternation of rain and sun that calls forth the wild-flower,—sweet, strong, and free, and 'tis the discipline of varied fortunes that will develope in the soul the qualities which constitute its beauty and its strength.

"——Where is he who knows?

From the great deep to the great deep he goes "

The profoundest intellect of man can penetrate no further into the origin of man's soul than this, that it comes forth from the great deep of an eternal and

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mysterious past, and it speeds onward to the great deep of a limitless and unfathomable future.

Our poet is fond of prophetic or significant dreams. In Leodogran's dream we have such a foreshadowing of Arthur's fortunes. The condition of things in Leodogran's own kingdom prior to Arthur's coming is sketched out :—

“ The sword rose, the hind fell, the herd was driven,
Fire glimpsed ;—”

At first the king is a phantom, now looming and now lost; but finally, in an instant, the solid earth becomes the phantom, and the king stands out in heaven crowned. This indicates the spiritual and subjective nature of the king and his kingdom. When the attention is fixed upon the outward world, he is but faintly and dimly discerned,—the material gets the better of the ideal: but when at last he is seen crowned in his majesty, then the transitory things of earth take their proper place,—the world and all it contains fade into nothingness.

Before we leave this poem, let us notice its characteristic features as to *Season* and *Hour*,—the time, that is, at which occur the birth of Arthur, and the setting up of the united reign of Arthur and Guinevere. These are evidently the leading points, or ruling situations, so to speak, in the *Idyll*. The poet is most careful to maintain a proper harmony and

sequence in such minor artistic unities as those of season, weather, and time; and so we shall find throughout. Here the exact position of these leading events is clearly defined:—

“ . . . That same night, *the night of the new year*,
Was Arthur born.”

And for the wedding:—

“ . . . Lancelot passed away among the flowers,
(For then was latter April), and return'd
Among the flowers, in May, with Guinevere,
To whom arrived the king
That *morn* was married.”

We will reserve a few remarks on the general structure of this Idyll for a more suitable opportunity in Chapter XVI., and so leave it for the present.





CHAPTER III.

GARETH AND LYNETTE.

THE tone of this poem is eminently bright and cheerful. It shows us Arthur's kingdom in the spring-tide of success and prosperity, and bidding fair, apparently, to answer to his noble purpose.

——— "Out of bower and casement shyly glanced
Eyes of pure women, wholesome stars of love ;
And all about a healthful people stept,
As in the presence of a gracious king "

We see the king engaged in the administration of even-handed justice to all, and setting in his own person the best example to his subjects. And we see, especially, a specimen of this influence in the way in which he attracts to himself, and fills with something of his own spirit, the young and ardent nature of Pelleas. For Pelleas cannot rest in his distant solitude. The achievements of Arthur and his knights

ring ever in his ears, and fill his youthful imagination. So the standard which Arthur has set up he yearns to follow, rather than any lower object :—

“ Follow the deer? follow the Christ, the King ;
Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the King,
Else wherefore born ? ”

The unities of season and time are strictly maintained in accordance with the action of the poem, and its place in the series.

Thus in the opening we see Gareth in the spring-time of youth and full of energy ; but pent-up at home, and labouring under a sense of repression. Without it is a “ showerful spring,” and the swollen torrent is seen undermining and whirling away the pine tree which grows on its bank. When at last Gareth gets his way and starts rejoicing for Arthur’s court, it is still spring, but no longer showerful :—

“ Southward they set their faces The birds made
Melody on branch, and melody in mid-air,
The damp hill slopes were quickened into green,
And the live green had kindled into flowers ;
For it was past the time of Easter-day.”

This marks clearly the season and weather, and so also for the hour :—

“ Far off they saw the silver-misty morn.”

This Idyll is replete with allegory. The allegorical

nature of Arthur's city comes out in the words of the attendants :—

- “Lord, there is no such city anywhere,
 But all a vision.”
•

The whole following description of the city and its gates, taken in connection with the coronation scene in the first poem, gives us a distinct intimation of this mystical significance of the kingdom of Arthur. We see Religion, as the Lady of the Lake, standing on the keystone of the arch, with arms outstretched in form of the cross, and supporting the whole super-structure. The keystone is

“————— lined
And rippled like an ever-fleeting wave”

in harmony with her dwelling, the deep waters with the eternal calm, and her dress tells the same tale. The drops of water which fall from either hand are, we may presume, the waters of baptism, which she offers to all who will come to her. The sword which hangs from one hand is the weapon of the Church militant, and represents the Church's outward life of conflict and struggle. The censer in the other shows us her inner and spiritual life of devotion. Both are worn with the winds and storms of long centuries of trial and endurance, within and without. The sacred fish which floats over her breast is the

~~It is~~ the ancient Christian symbol, which summed up in its five letters the distinctive creed of Christianity. In "Arthur's wars, new things and old co-twisted as if time were nothing" we see the strife which he and she wage,—always new to suit the ever-changing conditions of time and thought,—and always old, for it is essentially one and the same ; the old story under modified forms is perpetually repeating itself.

The utterances of the seer, like those of Merlin, are riddling presentments of the allegory. The fairy King and fairy Queens who come from a sacred mountain cleft¹ towards the sunrise, to build the city, are the old mythologies whose birthplace was in the East, the land of the rising sun. From them, besides the religions of the ancient world, are derived poetry, architecture, sculpture ; all those elevating and refining arts and sciences which were called into existence mainly and primarily as the expression and embodiment of religious feeling. These, with all that whole circle of unnumbered influences, mental, moral, or religious, derived from the experiences of the past, with which they are associated, constitute the city in which the soul dwells,—the sphere in which it

¹ That is, Parnássus, the abode of Apollo and the Muses ; also sacred to Bacchus :—

"οὐδ' ὅτι δὴ δαίμων πύρρος στήθεσσι θεῶντι λήγει."—SOPH. *Ant.*

Gareth and Lynette.

works, and the surrounding atmosphere which it breathes.

• “There is nothing in it as it seems, saving the king.”

For the soul is the centre and focus which gathers to itself all these scattered elements, and melts them all down in the crucible of its own subjective consciousness. The soul is to itself the one great eternal fact, and all else external to itself is but as the husk surrounding the kernel.

“——— Tho’ some there be that hold
The king a shadow, and the city real.”

These are the materialists, who deny the existence of the immortal spiritual soul, as independent of and distinguished from the surrounding external conditions.

“————— The king
Will bind thee by such vows as is a shame
A man should not be bound by, yet the which
No man can keep ”

The striving after a transcendental and impossible standard of perfection is the best and only way to effect the purpose of the King, namely, to “move upwards, working out the beast ;” and, accordingly, those who will not swear must abide without among “the cattle of the field.”

The city is built to music ; for, as the harmony and proportion of sound constitute music, so the harmony

and proportion of all the various elements and powers which go to make up the man, will constitute a fitting shrine for the ideal soul.

"Therefore never built at all;" for the process of assimilating and working up into one harmonious whole all the various external elements is continually going on and unending. "Therefore built for ever;" for since harmonious and proportionate development is the continual law, the city will always be complete and at unity in itself.

"Which Merlin's hand, the Mage at Arthur's court,
Knowing all arts, had touch'd, and everywhere
At Arthur's ordinance, tipt with lessening peak
And pinnacle, and had made it spire to heaven"

Merlin represents the creative and inventive faculty, the powers of thought and imagination, with all that they involve. He, therefore, knows all arts. The city is made to spire to heaven everywhere at Arthur's ordinance; for the ideal soul, in its upward strivings, leads upwards with it all the powers, attributes, and accessories which surround its being.

Leaving now this mystical account of the city, let us glance next at the experiences of Gareth in the quest.

• "Then to the shore of one of those long loops," &c.

The key to the interpretation, if any were needed,

is furnished later on where the struggle is described as the war of time against the soul of man.

The serpent river is the stream of time. Its three long loops the three ages of life—youth, middle age, old age. The guardians of the crossings are the personified forms of the temptations suited to these different ages.

In this first struggle we see the banks of the river rough-thicketed and steep, the stream full, narrow, marking the fulness of life and energy of youth. The bridge of single arc, which takes the river at a leap, marks this impetuosity of youth looking ever forward and leaping eagerly into manhood. The warrior who dwells in the gay, silken pavilion, and is armed by the three fair girls in gilt and rosy raiment, represents the power of pleasure, and (since he stands a moment glorying) of pride. "Thy shield is mine"—for temptation when met and overcome lends strength to resist temptation.

The second warrior in blinding mail, with red and cypher face of rounded foolishness, is, of course, the love of money, which dazzles and blinds the eyes of the soul. The stream of time has spread out into a raging shallow with no bridge, for we are in middle life with no marked point of transition. So also there is no precise point at which the temptations of middle age can be said to be overcome; but while the soul

was warring, "the stream descended and the sun was washed away."

In the case of the third warrior, the bridge of treble, bow, and rose-red from the west, marks the transition from middle life to old age. The warrior is

"Not naked, only wrapp'd in hardened skins
That fit him like his own."

These are interpreted for us, if there were any need of interpretation, further on :—

"————— He seem'd as one
That all in later, sadder age, begins
To war against *ill uses of a life* "

The chains of evil habit are only to be broken by one grand effort and radical change of heart and life ; so this antagonist is only defeated at last by hurling him headlong over the bridge.

These scenes are very well described, and the reader's interest well sustained to the end, where death, though apparently the most formidable antagonist of all, turns out to be no real foe, and his fall ushers in

"———— the happier day from underground "

The Lady Lyonors, on whose behalf the struggle is waged, appears to represent the soul of men in its immortal, spiritual essence—the spirit ; whereas her sister Lynette is, the rational, impressionable, sensuous soul, the Pysché. The poet evidently refers to that view

of man's nature which makes it consist of three distinct elements—spirit, soul, and body : and the course of the poem seems framed to show us how a lifelong warfare must be carried on by the arm of flesh (Gareth), under the guidance and with the assistance of the rational soul (Lynette), if the immortal spirit (Lyonors) is to be delivered from the foes that threaten its eternal ruin.¹

Lynette's snatches of song, which are all addressed to outward nature,—the morning star, sun, moon, flowers, birds, &c.—mark the sympathetic influence of external nature upon the sentient, emotional soul, which appeals, as it were, for sympathy in its joy or sorrow, to these natural and visible things, which surround it at the moment. Of a similar character is her utterance when Gareth is asleep.—

*"Good lord, how sweetly smells the honeysuckle
In the hush'd night, as if the world were one
Of utter peace, and love, and gentleness."*

There is in this poem a certain freshness, a lively and sparkling animation of tone, which is well sustained throughout, and harmonizes well with its general position and design. Some of the descriptions are very fine, especially those of the warriors who guard

¹ Compare Mr. Devey's view of the meaning of this idyll, "Comp. Est. of Mod. Engl. Poets," p. 324.

the river, which are most excellent pieces of allegorical scene-painting.

But then no beauty of detail suffices to reconcile us to the incredible kitchen-knave part of the story. And the poem as a whole seems somewhat lacking in human interest. For once the poet has dispensed with the aid of the affections—there is no love-making in the poem; and were it not for the youthful ambition of Gareth, there would be little to stir our sympathetic emotions.

On the whole, but for the magical glamour of poetry which the author has thrown over his work, and the sparkling jewelry of epithet and expression with which he has enriched it, it would appear comparatively but a meagre and poverty-stricken work.





CHAPTER IV.

ENID.

WHERE we leave the direct line of the Arthurian tradition. This is the Welsh story of the knight of the falcon, or Gherent, son of Erbin. In almost all the details the poet follows the original very closely, except that he has curtailed and condensed it a little towards the end.

The prettiest part of the poem is, as most readers will agree, the long episode near the beginning, forming the history of the faded silk, whereas the main course of the poem,—the story, that is, of Geraint's jealousy, its cause and cure,—seems less satisfactory. We are haunted all through by the feeling that there should have been no room for any such prolonged state of isolation and estrangement between Enid and her husband, as is here described.

If the mutual love of the pair, following upon the romantic history of the past, was really so great, then

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while, we are continually asking, was that unreserved confidence which is, or should be, the first condition of such a true affection, and the very atmosphere which it breathes? We are vexed and amazed as we read on and on in the story, and find no sign of it. However, there is this to be said, that the fault, although originally with Enid, who has not courage to tell her husband her thoughts about him, is in the sequel mainly confined to the blundering sterner sex. Enid gives expression to the reader's feeling, as well as her own, in those words.—

“ If he would only speak and tell me of it.”

His blindness, in not doing so, gives occasion for one of the finest passages, perhaps, in the Idylls :—

“ O purblind race of miserable men,
How many among us at this very hour
Do forge a life-long trouble for ourselves
By taking true for false or false for true?
Here, through the feeble twilight of this world
Groping, how many, until we pass and reach
That other, where we see as we are seen !”

The whole story, however, becomes more intelligible, when we regard it in the light in which, I think, the poet intends that it should be regarded,—namely, as setting before us the history and the evil working of *suspicion*. The jocund brightness of the general scene, as exhibited in the last Idyll, is already clouded by a

~~dark shadow~~ dark shadow looming ominously in the background. It is the malign influence of Guinevere's sin, which is beginning to get beyond its immediate authors, and to affect the outer world. And we now see it poisoning and tainting the springs of all domestic happiness at their very source. Geraint's suspicion, all his wearisome, hopeless, meaningless wanderings, light up with new meaning when we view them thus. Guinevere, the peerless one, the fairest flower of earth, has fallen, and why should not Enid fall? Has not Enid been on intimate terms with Guinevere, one of her most trusted attendants, and always near her? The whole air becomes filled with suspicion, and the hapless Geraint sees everything with jaundiced and distorted vision.

The reason for the introduction of all the earlier history of the wedded pair in such an episodical manner now becomes clear. The central idea and main action of the poem, turning upon the element of suspicion introduced into their married happiness by the sin of Guinevere, the situation out of which the proper course of the poem is evolved, occurs on that morning in which Enid is introduced in a position to say, and Geraint to misinterpret, those words—

“ Oh, me ! I fear me I am no true wife.”

This situation, then, is set forth early in the poem to

give us the clue to this central idea as soon as possible ; and the history of the pair, prior to the wedding, as being essentially no part of the story, is only thrown in as an interlude. But the long retrospective episode thus caused seems, artistically, very objectionable. During its course we forget this first scene, and have practically to begin, as it were, the story afresh, when we have read nearly half of the poem.

The sequence of cause and effect, and the mode in which coming events cast their shadows before, are, as is usual with our poet, artistically contrived, commencing from the hour when

“—— Guinevere lay late into the morn
Lost in sweet dreams, and *dreaming of her love*
‘For Lancelot’”

Geraint is a good embodiment of the knight of old, with the virtues and defects of the age. He is self-willed and obstinate, imperious and tyrannical, but withal brave, true and noble. He is rough, but it is a roughness that is in no way incompatible with a fitting reverence for the aged and the weak, and a chivalrous devotion to feminine sweetness and purity. In Arthur's words he is, like Gareth,

“————— Rough, sudden,
And pardonable—worthy to be knight”

This impetuous, rough and ready character is well maintained all through. We have, however, little

sympathy for him in his troubles on account of his jealous and overbearing conduct towards his wife, which side of his character was darkly shadowed forth in his courtship in the matter of the faded silk.

Enid is a tender and beautiful creation, with just those softer traits of character which her husband lacks. The timid silence in which she receives the tidings of Geraint's offer of marriage, the silent obedience in which she lays aside the costly and long-lost gown, or bears all her husband's jealous humours without a word, the tender care with which she keeps the faded gown, the modesty which ties her tongue when she is unjustly accused, the courageous eloquence with which her love inspires her in the Earl's castle—all these are characteristic traits. They show us the poet's ideal of perfect womanhood, ruled in all things and everywhere by divinely-implanted and divinely-governed affections.

In an artistic point of view this Idyll seems to be greatly open to a charge of want of unity and concentration of interest and effect. A leading cause of this is, of course, the long episode at the beginning, which we have already discussed. But, besides this, when at last we come to the gist of the poem—the steps, that is, by which the jealousy of Geraint works its own cure—we are not much better off. We follow Enid and her imperious lord in their journey, and are intro-

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duced to three tall knights, and then to three more tall knights, and then to the fair-haired youth and the four mowers, and then to the quondam lover Limours; but nowhere can we pause and draw breath.

No doubt the exigencies of the "quest," which presupposes, perhaps, a succession of adventures without any necessary connection, is mainly responsible for this. But still the inevitable result follows, that our attention is wearied and distracted by a number of minor events, each too unimportant to make any abiding impression, or arouse much real interest.

In "Gareth and Lynette" we had a number of successive adventures, but there the case was quite different. There was a sequence and connection between the different warriors guarding the different stages of the river of life, which served to give some unity and coherence to the general picture.

Before we leave this poem, we must notice the progress of our mystic year. In the last Idyll, as we saw,

"—— It was past the time of Easter-day ;"

Early in the present poem, the poet marks the season for us, it is

"—— on a summer morn,"

and so, later on, we find the mowers at work in the meadows.



CHAPTER V.

VIVIEN.

WE have travelled far in the unfolding of the general drama, when we have passed from "Enid" to "Vivien." *There* it was only suspicion: *here* it is certainty. There we had a whispered and darkly-hinted possibility of mischief: here it is manifested wickedness—open, flagrant, unblushing, self-assertive.

Many a Geraint must have had his domestic happiness ruined, many an Enid must have felt a gathering cloud of doubt and wretchedness between herself and her husband, before a Vivien was fairly possible. Yet here she is, and one glance at her speaks volumes as to the state of Arthur's court: for is she not one of the Queen's own immediate attendants?

Many readers will, no doubt, feel that this is of all the *Idylls* the one upon which they least care to dwell.

Vivien may be required from an artistic point of view in the general picture, by way of foil and contrast to the sweet and pure feminine characters, Enid and Elaine. She may be a dramatic necessity, more or less, in order to set forth the dread workings of evil, as here associated with the sin of Guinevere and Lancelot. She may serve to exhibit this sin in its own naked ugliness, apart from that surrounding cloak of sentiment and extenuating circumstance which might, in their case, lend it a certain degree of countenance and support. She may pave the way for those last scenes in which Arthur will take farewell of all he loves, and be reduced to the mournful confession that all the purport of his throne has failed. But Vivien is none the less repulsive in herself, and any very detailed study of her and her ways is likely to bring neither pleasure nor profit. We will therefore confine ourselves mainly to a few general remarks upon this poem.

Since such characters as Vivien do occur in real life, the poet is no doubt justified in bringing her before us in her proper place, as here, in his drama; provided he keep within the limits of decorum in the detailed treatment of his subject. Provided, above all, that she be set forth, when she does appear, in her proper deformity: not gilded over by a process of dishonest juggling between right and wrong, or veiled beneath a

covering of false and pernicious sentimentalism. And, although the sensuous aspect of his subject is fully put forward, the poet would seem never to have violated these conditions. Vivien's character is well brought out. To the versatile fascination of a Cleopatra she adds the cruel and subtle purpose of a Brinvilliers. She has the grace and attractiveness of a beautiful and glittering serpent, with a liberal share, also, of the serpent's venom and sting

It is nothing to her that Merlin has in no way injured her, but has been more tolerant of her and her ways than others with the same insight into them would have been. It is nothing that the achievement of her evil ambition can be of no real benefit to herself, and that the deed, once done, can never be undone. She cares not for the old man's own complete and entire ruin, or for the great and irreparable injury which his loss will inflict on his king and country. She seeks only her own momentary triumph over one renowned for his wisdom and skill. For this she schemes and contrives with all subtlety and patience; for this she challenges the wrath of heaven with blasphemous and lying imprecations; and for this the harlot is ready to sell herself in cold blood.

It may appear at first sight that the final yielding of Merlin, judged in the light of his own utterances a little earlier, is an unsatisfactory conclusion to the

story. He seems to appraise Vivien so clearly at her real value in his muttered comments upon her, that, after making every allowance for the weakness of age, overcome by importunity and weariness, it is yet difficult to understand his conduct. Is there no deeper reason in his moral constitution and character to account for it? For it seems clear that we must not make too much allowance for this weakness of age. Not only have we Merlin's own assurance of his consciousness that his blood

"Hath earnest in it of far springs to be,"

but all else that we see of him, in this his long voluntary journey into the wilds, goes to show that his age is hale and hearty, and his intellect unimpaired. Now, as we saw in "Gareth and Lynette," Merlin represents the creative and inventive faculty, the power of imagination. His strength lies in intellect as apart from, though not necessarily in antagonism with, religion. He is a philosopher and a keen-sighted observer. He is a searcher after the true and the beautiful, and his utterances have the elevated tone which might be expected from one who has spent a long life in such pursuits. So he shines by contrast with the debased and foul-minded Vivien, until we are disposed to credit him with a loftier standing than any to which he has really attained.

How comes it, then, that with this high moral tone, this deep, penetrating insight, this ripe experience of men and things, he yet allows himself to drift into a position in which, from very weariness, he must yield? He seems tinged with that most fatal defect of character which allows a man to think, and feel, and see, and know without acting. Such a character has established for itself a great standing landmark on the stream of time, a beacon-light for the warning of all future generations, in Pontius Pilate . . . Like him Merlin can weigh and decide with calm and judicial impartiality,—like him he has moral insight to expose the evil, and is not without perception of the just and the good. But, like Pilate, when the moment of action comes, he is found wanting. He has, no doubt, something more than a purely intellectual perception of the difference between right and wrong —

“Then Merlin to his own heart *loathing* said,
‘O, true and tender! O, my liege and king!’”

But still, on the whole, we see in him a fatal acquiescence which foreshadows Vivien’s ultimate triumph. He recognizes her true character, but it is the recognition of the skilful physician watching the dread workings of some foul disease, and studying the development of strange and abnormal symptoms with calm professional eye, not the indignant recognition of the just man who cannot endure the sight of evil,

who is jealous for the offended majesty of his God, and fearful lest he himself touch pitch and be defiled.

There is another element in the case to account for Vivien's triumph. Merlin is old, his blood is chilled with many winters, and calmed by a lofty and refined philosophy. But philosophers, old or young, cannot afford any more than others to despise the ordinary restraints of propriety and decorum :—

“The pale blood of the wizard at her touch
Took gayer colours, like an opal warmed.”

Grant, if you will, that there is here only the far-off echo, rather than the reality, of passion ; yet is there sufficient weight to turn the scale , and soon we see the gifted seer reduced to a condition little better than that of Lot, in “Gareth and Lynette” :—

“A yet-warm corpse, and yet unburnable.”

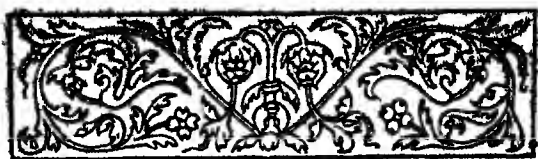
Let us now glance at the poet's careful observance, as usual, of his unities. The season is still summer, for the meadows are deep, and the grass in blossom ; and we have a summer thunderstorm.

The storm is significant. It is the outburst of the elements in harmony with the breaking out and open exhibition of evil in an aggravated form in the conduct of the debased and treacherous Vivien. The nearer approach of the storm corresponds with the growing imminence of Merlin's danger, and as he falls

the storm bursts. The time is afternoon : for Vivien speaks of "all the morning" as just past. And in the sultry summer afternoon, as is most natural, the storm occurs.

This is a very fine poem. At first, as has been said, we are not drawn to it, on account of the unattractive nature of the subject. But the more we study it, the more we shall appreciate its great artistic merit. There is a sustained power and force throughout, a unity and concentration of expression and purpose, and a general poetic strength, which combine to raise this poem to a high rank. It is especially strong in a direction in which the *Idylls* generally, as I shall hereafter attempt to show, seem to be deficient, namely in character-painting. With the exception, perhaps, of the two descriptions of the Northern Farmer, we shall hardly be able to find any character, among those described at any length in our poet's works, which is so powerfully and truthfully depicted as that of Vivien.





CHAPTER VI.

ELAINE.

IN the preceding Idylls we have seen so little of Guinevere and Lancelot that we may almost say that our first real introduction to them has been reserved for this poem; and this is somewhat late for it, seeing that they are leading characters.

Guinevere came before us in the first Idyll as the young and lovely bride. Here she is outwardly still the chief ornament of the court, over which she presides with queenly dignity and splendour. But fallen and degraded inwardly, we see her, in this poem, holding out one hand to the trustful king her husband, and with the other carrying on a secret intrigue with that king's right arm in battle and chief knight, Lancelot.

Opposite to her, in artistic contrast in the picture,

we have the heroine-Elaine. She is a tender and fragile figure, whose maiden purity and rustic loveliness, are diametrically opposed to Guinevere's peerless and queenly, but voluptuous and sin-stained beauty.

The commanding form of the great knight Lancelot stands, as it were, in the centre between these two women, who both love him so well; but in such different ways, and with such different results!

Lancelot, then, is the central figure in this Idyll. We have seen him before as the gallant and chivalrous knight, courteous in all things; but now we are introduced to the man himself. We recognize at once the saddened and disappointed man. He is inwardly conscious of living ever in presence of a loftier standard than any to which he himself has found grace to attain. His king is precious in his sight, and worthy of all devotion, but to that king's legitimate influence and working he knows himself to be the sorest hindrance; and he is requiting unsuspecting confidence by the darkest and deadliest of all injuries. The poet nowhere shows him to us in the throes and struggles of warring feeling, in the wild delirium of passion and triumph, or in the chill and despairing re-action of returning truth and loyalty. All that is over, and now he appears before us a sad and mournful figure, whose youth and hope are past and gone, who has sinned his

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en, and knows that retribution will surely follow—
yea, sees it already following.¹

Lancelot's true nobility of character, his chivalrous devotion to his high-souled king, his comprehension and insight into that king's lofty purpose and endeavour, are but the measure of his present settled sadness and gloom. Shall he then give her up, and free himself from these hateful chains? Yea, surely!

“————— I needs must break
These bonds, that so defame me.”

What? give up the woman who has sacrificed all for him? Never!

“————— not without she wills it.”

And so his life goes on. There is no point at which he can turn round and free himself. And, although in calmer moments of reflection he feels thus acutely the falsity and shame of his position, yet his life is so bound up with that of the woman whom he has loved so long and so well, that he can never be sure of his own resolve :—

“———— Would I, if she willed it? nay,
Who knows? But if I would not, then may God,
I pray Him, send a sudden angel down
To seize me by the hair, and bear me far,
And fling me deep in that forgotten mere
Among the tumbled fragments of the hills”

¹ Compare some remarks in the “Edinburgh Review,” April, 1870, p. 518.

The central idea and meaning of this Idyll, with reference to the general story and its place therein, seem to be well embodied in that striking scene between Guinevere and Lancelot, in the vine-clad oriel of Arthur's palace, with Lancelot's inward comments upon it, which we have just quoted.

Elaine, the pure, sweet lily—she who might have made

“ ——— This and that other world

Another world,”

for Lancelot, floats past beneath his eyes, in the stillness of death ; and of this death he is the cause. She floats over the spot where the flashing diamonds had just fallen. Those diamonds might well have been her's, together with him who won them , for did he not wear her favour in the fight ? and when before was Lancelot known to wear a lady's favour ? but no !—

“ The shackles of an old love straiten'd him,
His honour rooted in dishonour stood,
And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.”

And so, on the other side of the picture, we see here also the queen, now wild and jealous, flinging Lancelot's nine-years'-fought-for diamonds into the river, and bursting away from him to weep and wail, while he is left in half-disgust at love, life—all things.

The keynote of this poem, then, appears to be *the maturity of Passion and setting in of Retribution.*

Lancelot and Guinevere through long years have

the wind, and now they are made to feel the first blasts of the inevitable and rapidly advancing whirlwind. Guinevere's causeless jealousy may, in deed, be easily and quickly set at rest, but it is none the less an ominous comment upon the general situation and the relations between them, full of material for bitter and remorseful thought to Lancelot.

This poem follows immediately after Vivien. No sooner, that is, have we before us the evil in full development, than we see retribution setting in.

The unities also of season and weather are in complete harmony. The poet reserves any direct indications of the progress of his mystic year, until he has brought us to the oriel scene. But there he is careful to supply them, as if to mark unmistakably that this is the central and characteristic scene of the poem :—

“ ————— The sad chariot-bier
Past like a shadow thro' the field, that shone
Full-summer, to that stream whereon the barge,
Pall'd all its length in blackest samite, lay ”

And again :—

“ ——— Saying which she seized
And, thro' the casement, *standing wide for heat*,
Flung them, and down they flash'd and smote the stream.”

That is, we are in the midst of the torrid heats of summer, corresponding to the torrid tide of human passion in the drama.

This, then, we may call the mid-summer Idyll of the series, and this scene the central scene in it.

Elaine is a sweet and beautiful creation. She and Enid are naturally associated together, in our minds, as the two fair feminine ideal forms in the Idylls.

Perhaps their characters can hardly be better brought into relief than by comparing them together. Enid, although so modest and retiring, is yet the fuller, richer, more self-contained and independent character. Her womanly reticence and patient submission to her husband's jealous humours are in direct contrast with Elaine's more childish impulsiveness,—with her artless longing for expression and sympathy as shown in her confession of unsought love to Lancelot, and her wish to make her moan to Guinevere and all the world

Enid is to Elaine as the moss-rose to the snowdrop ; or as the rich melodious song of the nightingale to the simple and tender cooing of the ring-dove.

In this Idyll, as elsewhere, we see coming events casting their shadows before, in prophetic dreams —

“ ————— The maiden dreamt

That some one put this diamond in her hand,
And that it was too slippery to be held,
And slipt, and fell into some pool or stream ”

In the sequel we find, of course, that the diamond is really put into her hand by Gawain ; and it does

eventually find its way into the stream, when Guinevere flings it away with the rest.

This poem appears to illustrate, better perhaps than any other of the Idylls, the peculiarities of our poet's genius, as exhibited in his mode of arranging his subject.

Mr. Tennyson, as we said in the Introductory chapter, does not usually seek to rivet the attention of his reader by striking or deeply affecting scenes in these poems. He trusts rather to the effect of alternating light and shadow, to the artistic harmonies and contrasts produced by a varied and rapidly changing sequence and grouping of his incidents, as well as to the sympathies evoked by tender love-sentiment.

He generally leads us rapidly on, therefore, from scene to scene. But he seldom lets us leave any one scene, without setting before us one or two carefully drawn artistic studies of leading situations in it, which we may carry away in our memories. These, in most cases, would form excellent subjects for the art of the painter. They are often vividly set forth, with just those little realistic touches in which the eye of the artist most delights.

It is hardly necessary to refer back to the striking instances of this pictorial mode of treatment which occurred in "Gareth and Lynette;" such as—

- “—— Gareth silent gazed upon the knight,
Who stood a moment, ere his horse was brought,
Glorying ; and in the stream beneath him shone,
• Immingled with heaven's azure waveringly,
The gay pavilion and the naked feet,
His arms, the rosy raiment, and the star.”

Let us now notice a few such instances of this peculiar manner in the present poem, in order that we may get a fair idea of the extent to which the poet allows this pictorial line of treatment to be carried. For, in places, it seems almost to dominate over, rather than to be subordinated to, the working out of the story.

In the opening paragraph, then, we have a pretty account of Elaine's tender care for Lancelot's shield ; giving rise to two contrasted pictures. First, we see the heroine in the peaceful repose of her maiden slumbers —

“ Which first she placed where morning's earliest ray
Might strike it, and awake her with the gleam ”

And then she appears in action, in the romance of her waking dreams. She,

“ —— entering, barr'd her door,
Stript off the case, and read the naked shield ;
Now guess'd a hidden meaning in his arms ,
Now made a pretty history to herself
Of every dint a sword had beaten in it,
And every scratch a lance had made upon it,
Conjecturing when and where This cut is fresh ,
That ten years back , this dealt him at Caerlyle ,
That at Caerleon , this at Camelot ;
And, ah ! God's mercy ! what a stroke was there ! ” &c

Next a short transition passage brings us to the account of the diamonds. This episodical diamond-scene, by the way, appears to be entirely the coinage of our poet's imagination, as there is no foundation for it in the old legend. It is evidently introduced at this point that we may be taken with a leap to a contrasted scene. Instead of the maiden bower, we have the horror of the haunted glen and the mist-clad mountain side, still echoing with the fratricidal struggle. Instead of the sweet maiden herself, and her romantic love-dream, we have the yearning aspirations of youthful ambition in the opposite sex. The whole is embodied in a picture which we may lay hold of, and carry away —

“————— Their bones were bleach'd,
 And lichen'd into colour with the crags
 And he, that once was king, had on a crown
 Of diamonds—one in front, and four aside
 And Arthur came, and hastening up the pass
 All in a misty moonshine, unawares
 Had trodden that crown'd skeleton, and the skull
 Brake from the nape, and from the skull the crown
 Roll'd into light, and, turning on its rims,
 Fled like a glittering rivulet to the tarn
 And down the shingly scaur he plunged, and caught,
 And set it on his head, and in his heart
 Heard murmurs—'Lo, thou, likewise, shalt be king' ”

We pass now from the haunted glen to the court, and are introduced to Lancelot—the hero, if we may so

call him, of the piece—standing between the guileless King and the guileful Queen, torn one way by duty and another by love. Then we are carried to a rural scene in the castle of Astolat, where Elaine's rustic simplicity is in direct contrast with Guinevere's queenly and polished duplicity. The narrated experiences of Lancelot give occasion for a battle-picture:—

“ ——— on the mount
Of Badon I myself beheld the King
Charge at the head of all his Table Round,
And all his legions crying ‘ Christ and him,’
And break them , and I saw him, after, stand
High on a heap of slain, from spur to plume
Red as the rising sun with heathen blood,”

and Elaine's suddenly conceived affection gives one or two contrasted love scenes —

“ ——— to his proud horse Lancelot turn'd, and smooth d
The glossy shoulder, humming to himself
Half envious of the flattering hand, she drew
Nearer and stood He look'd, and more amazed
Than if seven men had set upon him, saw
The maiden standing in the dewy light
He had not dream'd she was so beautiful
Then came on him a sort of sacred fear,
For silent, tho' he greeted her, she stood
Rapt on his face as if it were a god's ”

“ ——— she stay'd a minute,
Then made a sudden step to the gate, and there—
Her bright hair blown about the serious face
Yet rosy-kindled with her brother's kiss—

Paused by the gateway, standing near the shield
In silence, while she watch'd their arms far-off
Sparkle, until they dipt below the downs."

Similarly all through; let it suffice to say that the whole poem is made up of these kind of rapidly changing scenes, with the contrasted pictures which they successively introduce.

The poet's delight in artistic contrast is specially manifest in that oriel scene, to which we have already referred as *the* characteristic scene of the whole poem. Here the picture has contrasted aspects, active and passive, according as we look at the oriel above, or the barge, with its sad burden, below. Above we see fallen Guinevere, the sinful agent, in the vehement action and life of unhallowed passion.—below spotless Elaine, the sinless sufferer, in the calm repose and death of sacred affection.

The general impression left upon our minds by the poem is that of an animated and discursive story, by which our interest and attention have, for the most part, been well sustained. Many of the descriptions, illustrations, and minor details generally are most telling and effective; and from the artistic point of view we feel just as if we had been conducted through a gallery of pretty and interesting pictures.

But the rambling and erratic course of the story necessarily tends to create a certain degree of confu-

sion and indistinctness in the general effect. And the rapid way in which the scenes are knocked off leads to a general sketchiness, and want of body and substance. The characters and the action are put before us rather with the light touch of a clever pen-and-ink sketch, than with the distinct and firm expression of a finished oil-painting.

And this result is enhanced by our poet's characteristic moderation in the conception and execution of his subject. We have here no grand or deeply affecting scenes to take a prominent place in our memories, and form a framework on which to hang the rest of the piece. The highest exhibitions of human passion which the poem affords are Guinevere's emotion when she hears of Lancelot's supposed faithlessness, or when she flings his diamonds into the river. Hence the poem lacks, on the one hand, the unity and concentration of purpose which show to such great advantage in "*Vivien*," and, on the other, the tragic force or mournful grandeur of "*Guinevere*" and the "*Passing of Arthur*."

This is said purely with a desire to assign to this Idyll its fair and proper place in the series, and with no idea of disparagement, or of any want of recognition of the many beautiful passages which undoubtedly occur in it.



CHAPTER VII.

THE HOLY GRAIL

IN his choice of a subject for this Idyll, the poet has gone into a new field. For the legends concerning the Sangreal are so numerous and varied, that they may almost be said to constitute a separate division of this ancient literature, collateral to, rather than part and parcel of, the proper Arthurian tradition. It is said by some writers that the original sources of these legends were pagan and not Christian, but, whether or no, in an age of superstition and unbounded religious credulity, the introduction into the older versions of a miraculous element, even though in an extravagant and fantastic shape, was no doubt considered to be a praiseworthy act by pious but uncritical monks.

The subject is eminently adapted for allegorical

treatment, and probably the poet has selected it for the groundwork of a poem in that stage in the general unfolding of the drama at which we have now arrived, with an eye to its capacities in this direction. For, as we shall see, the allegorical side of his subject generally is brought into greater prominence in the volume of which this poem forms part, than in the earlier published Idylls. We may almost say that this poem is a tissue of allegory from beginning to end. Hence it is, and is designed to be, full of moral teaching, the general drift of which we will consider a moment before going into details.

The search after the Grail forms a sort of test of the general situation at which we have now arrived. It is a touchstone by which we may try the knights of the Round Table to see how far they are acting up to the lofty standard which Arthur has set up. For, in our poet's presentment of the story, not only do those who see the Grail see "according to their sight," but the experiences of all in the quest are adapted to their several characters and differing moral status. So this poem suitably occupies a middle position in the series, following the first five Idylls, which showed us the growth to maturity of Arthur's Round Table, with its mixture of good and evil.

And the Holy Grail is more than a test. It shows us how our poor fallen humanity—inwardly conscious

of its own partial degradation and failure, and yet in its sin-born blindness feeling after higher things with but feeble and uncertain touch—seeks, indeed, to still the cravings of its soul with Religion ; but lowers and degrades that sacred form by confounding her with the fantastic shape of her counterfeit sister, Superstition. The eagerness of Arthur's knights to follow after the miraculous portent is but the measure of their own felt need of a new and supernatural element of strength infused into their own lives. They are all, more or less, like Lancelot, who wants to pluck asunder the wholesome flower from the poisonous within himself :—

“ ————— I swear—only in the hope
That, could I touch or see the Holy Grail,
They might be pluck'd asunder ”

And so the poem tells us that man's religious impulses, like all else—like his passions, his affections, his intellect—require to be chastened and held in subjection ; and that the highest life consists in the conscientious discharge of plain manifest duty, not in the search after something extraordinary and transcendental. While the knights are spending their strength in such a search after the Grail, Arthur, ~~the~~ ideal man, is seeking only not to

“ ——— ——— wander from the allotted field
Until his work be done.”

Albeit, when unfettered by the claims of duty, he is more enthusiastic and full of visions than they all.

In this aspect the poem cuts at the root of all those countless undisciplined and extravagant growths borne by the fair tree of Religion when suffered to run wild ; such as the whole system of monasticism, the perverted religious sects of America or Russia, or the rack and faggot of the inquisition.¹

And is there not one more lesson in this poem ? It seems to have caught an echo of those profound words, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead." The knights have had their allotted season of trial and instruction—they have had Arthur living and working among them, and the trumpet-blowings—

"——— Live the Christ, and die the lust "

By these lights they were not content to live, and now it is vain for the Round Table, fallen, to seek to be regenerated by a supernatural visitation from the other world.

The allegorical aspect of the subject is not obtruded so distinctly upon our notice as to interfere to any considerable extent with the truthfulness and realism

¹ The author is here indebted to a friend's kindness for a valuable remark on this view of the poem

of the picture; provided always that we accept loyally the wild monkish legend upon which the poem is based. For, of course, if we once allow ourselves to inquire critically into any impossibilities or absurdities which may meet us in the legend, we cut ourselves off from any common standing-ground with the poet, and his whole design is frustrated. In all such cases as this, we are expected to swallow the marvellous and the wonderful without a question, just, for instance, as we must do in reading the *Arabian Nights*, otherwise we cannot expect to derive much pleasure from the perusal.

But this poem leads us at the outset into another and a worse difficulty, arising also out of the mysterious and supernatural character of the Holy Grail itself. If the vision is to be regarded as a divine revelation, given in answer to prayer, then Galahad and the rest are quite right in following it at all hazards, and it is difficult to justify Arthur's opposition, and severe remarks upon their course. But if it be merely due to the excited imagination of crazy enthusiasts, then the quest is a delusion, and the King would be quite right in opposing it very much more strongly than he does. Such difficulties are inherent in the use of all such divine or pseudo-divine machinery as this. We must not, however, look into the matter so closely, nor should we have been disposed

to do so, probably, if the poet had not almost challenged us, his readers, to form an opinion of our own upon the matter, by the philosophic speeches which he puts into the King's mouth upon this very question. The grounds of Arthur's opposition to the quest are herein clearly stated. He says that no man, least of all the King himself, should leave his allotted sphere of duty to run after some self-chosen object—moreover, that such a transcendental pursuit was only suited to exceptional beings like Galahad; and that others would merely waste on it time and energies which might be better bestowed elsewhere.

In this poem Lancelot and the other leading persons of the drama take for a time a secondary place. The nun, the pure, sweet maiden rapt ever in prayer and contemplation,—the saintly heroic Galahad, a pure and simple boy-knight,—are the persons who, as is fitting, are brought nearest to the central object in the picture, the miraculous Grail.

Leaving now these more general considerations, and turning to the details of the poem, we find one of our poet's favourite enigmatical passages before we have read very far in it —

"In our great hall there stood a vacant chair
Fashion'd by Merlin ere he past away,
And carven with strange figures, and in and out
The figures, like a serpent, ran a scroll
Of letters in a tongue no man could read

And Merlin call'd it 'The Siege perilous,'
 Perilous for good and ill; 'for there,' he said,
 'No man could sit but he should lose himself.'
 And once, by misadventure, Merlin sat
 In his own chair, and so was lost; but he,
 Galahad, when he heard of Merlin's doom,
 Cried, 'If I lose myself I save myself!'"

There appears to be a variation in the legends about this chair. In one version we are told that no man ever sat upon it till Galahad came, except one, and that a flame leaped forth and drew that man down underground. In our poet's rendering of the story we are, I presume, intended to understand the chair to represent allegorically the chair of *knowledge*. It is fashioned by Merlin, who symbolizes, as we have seen, the powers of Intellect and Imagination, and it may be taken as the product of his lifelong researches and superhuman insight. The strange figures carved on it denote, perhaps, the strange mysteries and phenomena which arise in the changeable course of things in this world; whether they be those of an impenetrable Past, of a mysterious Present, or of an inscrutable Future. Into these the eye of the gifted seer has a deeper insight than that of ordinary men. And the scroll of unintelligible letters ~~which~~^{which} runs through them we may take to be the hidden meaning and true design of it all—the eternal purposes of the great Author, which are hidden from the eyes of all

living. The chair is perilous for good and ill, because the acquisition of knowledge involves increased capacities and responsibilities, whether for good or for evil. For whoever sits in the chair cannot remain as he was before. He must go forward to higher perfection, or backward to deeper failure. In either case he loses his old self :—

“No man could sit but he should lose himself.”

Merlin sat in it and was lost, because, as we have seen, his discernment of Vivien's guile was unaccompanied by sufficient moral reprobation and firmness of will to prevent him from falling into her snare. Galahad will lose himself to save himself, because he loses his share in this world and all that it has to offer, in order that he may be crowned “King, far in the spiritual city.”

In reference to the unities of season, and the progress of our mystic year, note the poet's care to keep us duly furnished with proper indications of our position, when he comes to that which is *the* significant action, out of which is evolved the whole course of the poem,—namely, Galahad's sitting down in the chair :—

“——— On a summer night it came to pass
That Galahad would sit down in Merlin's chair ”

that is, it is still summer.

Arthur's return to Camelot presents an opportunity for another allegorical description :—

" O brother, had you known our mighty hall,
Which Merlin built for Arthur long ago !
For all the sacred mount of Camelot,
And all the dim, rich city, roof by roof,
Tower after tower, spire beyond spire,
By grove and garden-lawn, and rushing brook,
Climbs to the mighty hall that Merlin built
And four great zones of sculpture, set betwixt
With many a mystic symbol, gird the hall ;
And in the lowest beasts are slaying men,
And in the second men are slaying beasts,
And on the third are warriors, perfect men,
And on the fourth are men with growing wings,
And over all one statue in the mould
Of Arthur, made by Merlin, with a crown
And peak'd wings pointed to the Northern Star.
And eastward fronts the statue, and the crown
And both the wings are made of gold, and flame
At sunrise, till the people in far fields,
Wasted so often by the heathen hordes,
Behold it, crying, ' We have still a king ! ' "

This hall, built by Merlin for Arthur, is the structure which the ideal soul builds for itself by the exercise of its powers of imagination and intellect. The other parts of the city, the roofs, the towers, the spires, we may understand as the minor accessories and adjuncts of its life. But this is the inner shrine of *personality*, wherein the soul itself sits. The symbolic zones of sculpture represent the growth of the shrine, that is, the progress of man in his efforts to raise himself

above the earthly and the animal. We see him moving upwards from the lowest tier, wherein the animal triumphs, to the highest, where perfect manhood is growing wings for a still higher flight. Four is the well-known number indicating completeness ; so that the *four* zones represent the entire progress of the human race. The statue of Arthur over all marks the origin and the essential condition, as well as the end and object of this progress—namely, the setting-up of the empire of the soul.

Thus the external aspect of the hall represents the dominion of the soul in its external and visible effect upon the progress of the human race. Next we have its internal aspect :—

“ And, brother, had you known our hall within,
Broader and higher than any in all the lands '
Where twelve great windows blazon Arthur's wars,
And all the light that falls upon the board
Streams thro' the twelve great batiles of our king.
Nay, one there is, and at the eastern end,
Wealthy with wandering lines of mount and mere,
Where Arthur finds the brand, Excalbur
And also one to the west, and counter to it,
And blank and who shall blazon it? when, and how?—
O there, perchance, when all our wars are done,
The brand, Excalbur, will be cast away.”

The hall is broader and higher than any in all the lands, as denoting that the subjection of the lower side of man's nature to the higher brings true liberty and

freedom to his life. All the light inside streams through the twelve great battles of the King, showing that the inner light of the soul's life is derived from conflict ; continual warfare is its essential condition. The warfare is depicted, from the first taking of the spiritual sword in baptism—the commencement of the spiritual life—to the laying down of the sword, which will be when all warfare is over.

The King's horror lest the hall should vanish like a dream seems to mark the spiritual and immaterial character of the whole.

Turning now to the quest itself, we see that Percivale's first lesson in it is this—the fatal and clinging power of evil in the past, as paralyzing effort and leading to gloom and despondency for the future.

Then we have his experience of the hollowness of the various earthly ways in which man vainly attempts to satisfy the cravings of his spiritual nature. There is first appetite with its allurements in the goodly apples, and the attractive surroundings of lawn and brook. Then love and domestic happiness in the woman spinning. Next Mammon, with his golden armour and crown of gold. Last, Fame, in the goodly company that cried out from the city with the spires and pinnacles. But with none of these can Percivale quench the thirst of his soul. Each and all of them

only leave him more solitary, thirsty, and weary than before.

The Hermit's interpretation of it all—

“Thou hast not lost thyself to save thyself,
As Galahad,”—

supplies a clue, if any were needed, to the right understanding of the riddle of Merlin's chair, and shows that our view is correct of the interpretation of Galahad's words, “If I lose myself I save myself.”

The hill that “none but man could climb,” with “storm at the top and death,” is a fitting introduction to a vision of the departure of a soul whose course on earth is run.

In dealing with such a theme as this, it must be difficult for the poet to combine judiciously a realistic treatment of his subject in detail with a sufficiently close adaptation of the story to the allegorical significance. The former condition is necessary to give life, colour, and power to the picture; the latter to a proper exhibition of its spiritual meaning. This latter side seems to be here put forward more prominently than usual, and the details in consequence necessarily assume a visionary and impossible character.

In the account of Percivale's meeting with his old love, we have a powerful description of the triumph of the sense of duty and obedience over the human wishes

and affections, even where deepest and most legitimate. Note the three stages of the spiritual conflict—

“ O me, my brother ! but one night my vow
 Burnt me within, so that I rose and fled,
 But wail'd and wept, and hated mine own self,
 And e'en the Holy Quest, and all but her ;
 Then after I was join'd with Galahad,
 Cared not for her, nor anything upon earth.”

There is first the burning sense of oppression arising from consciousness of unfulfilled responsibilities, when Percivale is in a condition analogous to that of the Psalmist in his unrepentant state, whose “ moisture is like the drought in summer.” He breaks through this, at the expense of her happiness and his own, and we have *the recoil of wounded feeling ; he hates all life and duty, and all but her.* But when he is joined with Galahad, and fairly embarked in the pursuit of an unearthly object, he forgets all else, and can say like Galahad—

“ More bounteous aspects on me beam,
 Me mightier transports move and thrill.”

But, when all is said, we are left with a feeling that his lady is very badly treated, and that he would have been much better employed in making her and her people happy than in following the “ wandering fires.”

The effect of the story upon the listening monk is

strikingly told. He inwardly contrasts such an experience of duty in the great world without—Percivale's throes and anguish, his living reality of passion and suffering—with duty as interpreted by the dull routine of the cloister, where all the brethren are so hard, and where his own heart seems to grow cold and dead from long years of monotony and repression. The story is to him like a breath of the free air of heaven to a captive, who has been immured for years in a dungeon.

Passing over the adventures of Sir Bors, let us turn now to Lancelot's experiences in the quest. These seem evidently to describe the state of a soul in which the "wholesome and poisonous flowers" are growing together, and the lessons which must be learnt if they are to be plucked asunder, and upward progress to be achieved.

The beating down by little men, mean knights, shows us the state of spiritual weakness to which the soul is reduced by acquiescence in its darling sin. The naked shore, where nothing but coarse grasses grow, is like the dreary spiritual waste through which such a soul must wander, so long as a serious effort is not made. The blast is surely the setting in of this necessary conflict, and the seven days' voyage along the storm-tossed sea, the transition stage of struggle and doubt. The lions guarding the landing on the

solid rock beyond, with the interpreting voice, "Doubt not, go forward," show us the first necessary condition if this sea of doubt is to be safely passed, namely, *Faith*. The empty hall beyond tells of a withdrawal from the world for quiet and solitary communion with the infinite and the eternal. So, also, the moon shining aloft, above the rolling sea, whispers to the soul, in its calm serenity, of brighter and better things, far above all this turmoil and struggle and perplexity. The whole scene speaks of *Meditation* and *Prayer*. And now the clear, sweet voice in the eastern tower—the tower nearest the rising sun—sings of *Hope*, and the myriad steps up which Lancelot seems to climb with pain for ever tell of *Endurance*. But, though admitted to the very threshold, he sees not at last the Holy Grail, or, if he sees, it is veiled and covered, to remind him of the necessity of *Purity*.

Lastly, let us glance at the last paragraph containing the king's closing words :—

"And some among you held, that if the King
 Had seen the sight he would have sworn the vow.
 Not easily, seeing that the King must guard
 That which he rules, and is but as the hind
 To whom a space of land is given to plough,
 Who may not wander from the allotted field —
 Before his work be done; but, being done,
 Let visions of the night or of the day
 Come as they will; and many a time they come,
 Until this earth he walks on seems not earth,

This light that strikes his eyeball is not light,
This air that smites his forehead is not air,
But vision—yea, his very hand and foot—
In moments when he feels he cannot die,
And knows himself no vision to himself,
Nor the High God a vision, nor that One
Who rose again."

I suppose we might paraphrase this freely, somewhat in this way.—"The ideal soul seeks not to escape from the outward realities of life and duty to become, like the Buddhist, absorbed in contemplation. But, in leisure moments, when work is over, its own subjective consciousness comes upon it at times with overwhelming force. It realizes its own immortal life, apart from all these external surroundings, and there are left to it only two beings in the universe—itsself and its God—with Him by whom alone it can hold communion with the divine nature, God manifest in the flesh."

In our study of this Idyll, I have not cared to inquire how far the allegorical story which Mr. Tennyson has given us differs, either in its general scope and spirit, or in its details, from the old legend. The poet has contrived to give a rendering of the whole which will suit his purpose without any violent departure from his authorities. Such points of difference, as that it is Lancelot in the legend, instead of Arthur, as here, who knights Galahad, his own reputed son, and says

in doing it, "God make thee good as thou art beautiful," are hardly worth dwelling upon.

Since the fortunes of several different individuals are here dealt with, with only the somewhat loose connecting link of the common search after the Grail, the poem is necessarily somewhat disjointed, lacking unity and dramatic interest. Nevertheless, it will hardly be disputed that it is a fine work, with many striking passages, worthy of the poet's great reputation.





CHAPTER VIII.

PELLEAS AND ETTARRE.

MAKING the Holy Grail as the central poem in the Idylls—as respects their artistic grouping—we find it flanked on each side by two similar but contrasted poems. In Elaine we had the story of a simple, noble woman, of her affections blighted, her life sacrificed—a sacrifice for which Lancelot and Guinevere were indirectly responsible.

The leading idea of the poem now before us seems to be the sacrifice of just such a simple and noble male nature. The strong Pelleas does not, indeed, wither up and perish like the tender Elaine; but the milk of human kindness within him is turned to gall and wormwood, and his life is blighted. The corruption of others is his bane as it was hers. And it is just this which constitutes one of the most remarkable

features in the four Idylls immediately surrounding the Holy Grail. They exhibit the spreading power and widening reach of that corruption in Arthur's court which we saw setting in in "Enid." Merlin, Elaine, Pelleas, Isolt of the white hands, one and all have no direct share in the evil itself; but they are none the less dragged into the vortex of the huge whirlpool which it creates.

The poem opens in a cheerful tone which reminds us of "Gareth and Lynette." The healthy vigour and buoyant hopes of the youthful Pelleas are in marked contrast with the somewhat sad and foreboding impression left upon our minds by the "Holy Grail." We begin to take courage and think that brighter things may yet be in store for the Round Table. We see in Pelleas the possible representative of a new generation of younger knights rising up, full of fervent zeal and faith, men after Arthur's own heart: and, if so, all may yet be well. With this idea the external scene is in complete harmony:—

"————— a youth,
Pelleas, and the sweet smell of the fields
Past, and the sunshine came along with him."

That is, we are in a kind of swallow's summer, before the autumn, which is now imminent, sets in. But this bright and cheerful opening only serves to throw by contrast

a darker shadow over the sombre and sadly prophetic scene with which the poem closes.

There seem to be many points of resemblance in character between Pelleas and Elaine. One might almost say that the one is but a masculine and warrior-like edition of the other.

The first simple and straightforward petition of Pelleas at the opening of the poem :—

“ Make me thy knight, because I know, Sir King,
All that belongs to knighthood, and I love.”

reminds us of the first guileless and outspoken request of Elaine :—

“ ————— Will you wear
My favour at this tourney?”

The same tender and romantic nature which makes the shield of the one-day-seen Lancelot so dear to Elaine appears in Pelleas :—

“ ————— Where?
Oh where? I love thee, tho' I know thee not.
For fair thou art, and pure as Guinevere,” &c

The same unsuspecting nobility of soul which causes Elaine to refuse to believe her father's evil report concerning Lancelot and Guinevere appears in Pelleas :—

“ ————— So did Pelleas lend
All the young beauty of his own soul to her's,
Believing her.”

The same courage which leads the tender maiden to go in search of the poor wounded Lancelot takes a more masculine shape in the hard-fought fights of Pelleas. The same patient endurance and strength of affection which enable her to be ever to the sick man "milder than any mother to a sick child," we see in Pelleas when he sits all day long on his horse for weeks, hopelessly waiting for the gates to be opened to him. We find, too, in him the same feeling of repression and longing for utterance which led Elaine to wish to go in death to make her moan

" ————— To our lady Guinevere,
And to all other ladies."

For in the bitterness of his grief and indignation Pelleas cannot rest, he must take action :—

" Like a poisonous wind I pass to blast
And blaze the crime of Lancelot and the Queen."

The character of Gawain is further developed for us in this Idyll, both on its good and bad sides. We have known him before as "a good knight," after sundry others his betters in the Round Table. Now when he sees the villainy, three to one,

" ————— Thro' his heart
The fire of honour and all noble deeds
Flash'd, and he call'd, 'I strike upon thy side!' "

But we know that he was not "often loyal to his

word." And so we have not much faith in his friendly promise to assist Pelleas, more especially as there is a lady in the case, and after our experience of him in his meeting with Elaine. His reply to Pelleas's well-founded caution does not help to re-assure us :—

“ ‘ —— Betray me not, but help—
Art thou not he whom men call light-of-love?’
‘ Aye,’ said Gawain; ‘ for women be so light ’ ”

This theory that “women are so light” has always been the excuse of licentious men. They have an uncomfortable inward consciousness that their own relations to the sex will not bear investigation. So they vainly seek to excuse themselves, and establish a low standard generally on the whole subject by systematically underrating and depreciating all feminine truth and purity whatever. But their desire to make out that the general standard is thus low is the measure of their own conscious need of being judged by a low standard. And so, as we half expected, it proves in the case of Gawain.

The scene wherein his treachery is discovered is powerfully described, together with the subsequent comments of Pelleas upon it. This is, of course, the culminating point of the Idyll, and brings out well the transition of the poor deceived Pelleas from the open-hearted confidence of an unsuspecting nature to bitterness and distrust of everything, and everybody.

We notice again, in this scene, the poet's careful observance of his artistic unities :—

“ ————— Who yells
Here in the still, sweet *summer* night, but I——”

But however important the scene may be when the poem is regarded as an individual picture, a more important one still, viewed in relation to the general drama and the position of the Idyll in the series, occurs in the encounter of Lancelot and Pelleas. For this, being as it is a revelation to Lancelot of the results of his own work, occupies a corresponding position in this poem to the oriel scene in “Elaine.” And here, accordingly, we get the closest indications of season and hour :—

“ ————— The gloom,
That follows on the turning of the world,
Darken'd the common path,”

in harmony with the deep gloom in the heart of the poor deluded and betrayed Pelleas.

And again :—

“ ————— The boy
Across the silent, seeded meadow-grass
Borne, clash'd——”

Here the outward aspect of nature is still in marked agreement with the general situation.

That degradation of the morals of the Court and

everyone connected with it, which Lancelot began, and with which he knows himself to be identified, is now rising up in judgment against him with ever-increasing force. Of this the frantic cry and headlong career of the maddened Pelleas is but another instance. The evil seed which Lancelot sowed long years ago has germinated, has grown up, and is now, like the meadow-grass, *seeding* again in its turn to spread the mischief. He feels this, he sees it, he knows it : and every fresh revelation of it only shows him the more clearly how hopelessly it has got beyond him. The open and public revelation of the secret can hardly make matters much worse now. At all events, he will not commit himself to an act of vengeance on a prostrate foe, from which his soul recoils, for the sake of a longer attempt to hide it—

“ Rise, weakling, I am Lancelot, *say thy say* ”

This poem possesses the great artistic advantage of unity and simplicity, and is, so far, of a more nearly idyllic character than most of these “Idylls.” But, even here, the kind of catastrophe caused by Gawain’s discovered faithlessness imparts a dramatic character out of keeping, one would imagine, with the true idea of an idyll. To this simplicity of expression the absence of any allegorical under-

current of meaning also conduces ; for in this poem the allegory recedes again into the background.

But, still, the work does not seem to leave any very abiding impression upon us. The leading characters come before us for this occasion only. Their fortunes are not linked to those of the prominent persons in the Idylls by a common share in any leading action of the story. Neither are they themselves distinguished by any pronounced individuality of their own which might cause them to dwell in our memories. Ettarre is not abandoned and fascinating enough to make a Vivien ; neither does Pelleas stand out upon the canvass in any independent strength. And, indeed, there is not, perhaps, much scope for evoking any such display of individual character in the story itself. That a vain and unprincipled woman should encourage the admiration of an unsophisticated youth for her own purposes, and then throw him over without remorse, to bestow her favour on another, is, no doubt, highly unpleasant for the youth, and calculated to elicit a corresponding degree of passionate resentment on his part. But there is, after all, nothing very novel or tragic in the case. And in the absence of any special claim arising from many scenes or passages of striking interest or merit in the working out of the story, we shall hardly, I think, be able to assign any very distinguished place to this poem.



CHAPTER IX.

THE LAST TOURNAMENT.

THE summer idylls are fairly over, and autumn has set in.

No later than the third line we find—

“High above the yellowing woods.”

And a little further on—

“In among the faded fields”

This fading autumn stage is the keynote of the whole poem.

It is all of a piece :—The maimed churl, with his defiant message from the Red Knight, telling of brute force and violence confidently re-asserting themselves, in spite of Arthur's lifelong struggle against them ; Arthur's rebuke to Lancelot, and sad forebodings for the future of his realm and people ; the involuntary

"sigh of Guinevere, who watches her lord pass, and knows not that she will never see his face again; the last tournament, the tournament of the dead innocence, with all its circumstances; the slow, sad steps of Lancelot; the autumn thunder; the yellowing leaf; the gloom and gleam and shower; the broken laws; the craven crests, the sullied choice of Tristram; the thick rain; the unseemly revels; the fountain that had run itself to a sour end, Arthur's title of the King of Fools, as thinking he could make men from beasts; the unknightly conduct of the Round Table at the destruction of the Red Knight and his tower; the last scene between Tristram and Isolt, with its setting sun and on-coming darkness,—all throughout it is one and the same story, it may all be summed up in one word, "Ichabod"—

"The glory of our Round Table is no more."

So the yellowing woods and faded fields with which the poem opens are in strict harmony with the general situation, and the progress of the drama. We are reminded of those words of Byron.—

"My days are in *the yellow leaf*.
The flowers, the fruits of love are gone :
The worm, the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone"

We have before noticed our poet's fondness for

allowing coming events to cast their shadows before. Such kind of prophetic intimations are sometimes introduced in a very striking and artistic way, somewhat after the manner of the old Greek tragedies. To forsake the Idylls for a moment, in *Enoch Arden*, when the children are at their thoughtless play, the little heroine is made to say that she will be "little wife to both," which, of course, afterwards comes to pass. Another instance occurs later in the present poem, where *Tristram*

"————— felt the goodly hounds
Yelp at his heart."

Earlier we have a similar but contrasted case.—

"Perchance—who knows?—the purest of thy knights
May win them for the purest of my maids"

This aspiration of *Guinevere*, spoken doubtless in good faith by her, must be read in the light of her own position. Like the witches' version of the Lord's Prayer, it must be spelt backwards. And, taken thus, it forms a sad commentary upon the past, and an ominous prophecy for the future. For indeed, as we know, the purest knight will turn out to be *Tristram*, stained like her own *Lancelot* with adultery, and the "purest of maids" will be *Isolt*, the partner in his guilt, as *Guinevere* herself in *Lancelot's*.

In the account of the tournament itself the most

interesting feature is, perhaps, the behaviour of Lancelot—

“—— Sighing wearily, as one
Who sits and gazes on a faded fire
When all the goodlier guests are pass'd away,
Sat their great umpire, looking o'er the lists.”

It is all a hollow mockery to him. The stately galleries, with their galaxy of white-robed fair ones ; the fountains running wine, with the little attendants and their golden cups ; the carefully drawn out lists, with their marshalled array of knights and attendants—it is all a weariness. Spite of that daily acted lie, which lowers him in his own eyes, and makes all life a burden, Lancelot's nature is at bottom too true and noble to be satisfied with a fair outward show. It all looks well, but the words of Arthur ring ever in his ears, “ Is it then so well ? ”

For Lancelot knows the bitterness and the meanness, the intrigues and the jealousies, which underlie it all; the unknightly spirit of so many of the knights, and the sullied and unloveable womanhood of so many of the ladies. But it is his own place in it which saddens him the most. He cannot sever himself in spirit from it, or make one honest effort to mend it. He is bound up with it. Action and energy are paralyzed by the consciousness of his own position and leading share in it :—

"He saw the laws that ruled the tournament
Broken, but spake not."

What burden so heavy as his who can think, and feel, and see, and know, with no power of action—*ἐχθίστη ὀδύνη, πόλλα φρονέοντα, μηδενὸς κρατεῖν*. But there is one point, at least, whereon Lancelot feels that his own hands are clean. He sees a foeman worthy of his steel, before whom the craven knights all draw back, and there is none to strike one good blow for woman's love or knightly fame. The strong spirit of the great knight, who, be his errors what they may, has ever been foremost in the hard-fought field, revolts within him; he

"—————yearn'd to strike
The burden off his heart in one full shock
With Tristram ev'n to death : his strong hands gript
And dinted the gilt dragons, right and left,
Until he groan'd for wrath."

Lancelot's place and behaviour on this occasion are very finely conceived, and very well told.

The choice of Isolt for Queen of Beauty is the crowning triumph of evil passion over purity and truth. Her name is not indeed mentioned, but is well understood by all, from Tristram's blunt speech. And the setting up of the adulterous queen, even without her visible presence, in that throne where the purest and fairest of maidens should have reigned, is to the

Round Table the symbol of their completed degradation, and to Guinevere the startling resurrection of her own sin. Her falsely-prophetic words to Arthur make us understand that this is in the mind of the poet.

Dagonet's humour has a certain quaint and racy flavour about it which causes him to take a stronger hold upon our memories than some of the more important characters may be apt to do. He is an illustration of the power for good of a new and strong affection. Some time back he was "smuttier than blasted grain" But love and reverence for the king his master, who promoted him to be near his own person in the, for him, distinguished capacity of court jester, have made a changed man of him. As he quaintly puts it—

"The dirty nurse, Experience, in her kind
Hath foul'd me—an I wallow'd, then I wash'd"

And so he is disposed rather to shun the society of those free-spoken and free-living knights, whom he used to amuse with his loose storics and jokes, alone he skips—

"Belike for lack of wiser company"

He has no idea of dancing to Tristram's music, and when Tristram asks his reason, his replies, as all

through, show us his true mind veiled under the licensed satire of the jester—

• “——— I had liefer twenty years
Skip to the broken music of my brains
Than any broken music ye can make.

• • • • •
For when thou playest that air with Queen Isolt,
Thou makest broken music with thy bride,
Her daintier namesake down in Brittany,
And so thou breakest Arthur's music too ”

For Dagonet has more feeling and moral insight into it all than any for which the careless Tristram is ever likely to give him credit. He mourns in his secret soul over that breaking of Arthur's music which he sees going on around him. He recognizes the almost superhuman character of the king's lifelong struggle—

“ Ay, ay, my brother fool, the king of fools,
Conceits himself as God, that he can make
Figs out of thistles, silk from bristles, milk
From burning spurge, honey from hornet combs,
And *men from beasts* Long live the king of fools ! ”

We see the spring of it all—his affection and reverence for his king—at the end of the poem. When the guilt of the queen has been openly proclaimed, and her flight has left her bower dark, so that concealment is no longer possible, it is Dagonet who waits in the autumn-dripping gloom for Arthur's coming. He dreads the effect of the revelation so that he hardly

dares to stop the king, and yet fears lest the terrible truth come upon him too suddenly, so that he dare not let him pass :—

“ ————— About his feet

*A voice hung sobbing, till he questioned it,
‘What art thou?’ and the voice about his feet
Sent up an answer, sobbing, ‘I am thy fool,
And I shall never make thee smile again.’ ”*

The scene at the destruction of the Red Knight and his lawless crew presents one of the few occasions in the Idylls when Arthur appears in action on the stage. If the spirit of the well-known maxim—“Nec deus intersit,” &c.—is to be carried out, we should expect that, on these few occasions, an unusually exalted and dignified rôle would be assigned to him by the poet, And so, no doubt, it is intended to be. We shall hardly, however, consider this a very successful instance. The part which Arthur is made to play, his impotent command and unheeded rebuke, will hardly enhance his dignity in our eyes. No doubt this is not his own fault, but rather that of his knights. Still this does not substantially alter the case, or avail to make his position any the more dignified or impressive.

The casement scene between Tristram and Isolt is finely conceived and executed, forming a fitting conclusion to the poem. Let us notice the condensed and striking description of the meeting with which it

commences, and then glance at Isolt's account of her solitude :—

“—— Yearnings?—ay! for hour by hour,
Here, in the never-ended afternoon,
O sweeter than all memories of thee,
Deeper than any yearnings after thee,
Seem'd those far-rolling, westward-smiling seas,
Watch'd from this tower.”

The subtle power of expression in these lines is very charming. The most prosaic and unmusical reader might find his sympathies awakened by them. As we listen to their rhythmic flow we seem to see the lovely Queen, sitting alone in her casement through the weary hours, and striving to still the pent-up yearnings of her impassioned soul, by endless watching of those long, lazy, rolling billows, by travelling with them in spirit to that far-off shore, and listening to their unceasing and slumbrous sound.

There is a certain cold-blooded and cynical hardness in Tristram :—

“May God be with thee, sweet, when old and grey,
And past desire.”

We are reminded of his language to the poor, forsaken and weeping woman whom he met on his road :—

“Yet weep not thou, lest, if thy mate return,
He find thy favour changed, and love thee not.”

There is the same cold, calculating spirit in his words about his own forsaken wife :—

“————— Isolt ?

Care not for her ! patient, and prayerful, meek,
Pale-blooded, she will yield herself to God.”

We see in him the hardness and insensibility to the sufferings of others, produced in a selfish nature by the habitual sacrifice of every better and more generous impulse to the promptings of its own luxury and pleasure.

The Queen shines by contrast : she has a higher and better nature than Tristram. Passionate and voluptuous she may be ; as she says herself

“————— *Not* meek,

Pale-blooded, prayerful,”

nevertheless, it is the deep craving of her woman's nature for sympathy and affection—not passion—which is at the root of Tristram's power over her. Affection she must have —

“————— I should suck

Lies like sweet wines. he to me I believe

* * * * *
Swear to me thou wilt love me ev'n when old,
Grey-haired, and past desire, and in despair.”

And this is the secret of her conduct at the beginning of the scene, on the first arrival of Tristram. She forgets all her long weary hours of watching and hope-

less yearning during his faithless absence: she forgets the bitter pang of his marriage, and of her part in him, given to a younger rival: she forgets everything in the delight of exchanging loneliness, monotony, and repression for one more gleam of happiness and love:—

“I had forgotten all in my strong joy
To see thee”

Tristram's character is well brought out in the conversation between them. He is a pleasure-seeking man who is inwardly conscious that he is working below his own moral standard, and seeks to drown these unpleasant inward whispers of his own better self, by taking refuge in a careless Epicureanism, half *affected* and half *real*. *He has evidently a deeper moral and philosophic insight into his own character and position than any for which, on a hasty view, we might have given him credit* But it is precisely this—this deliberate and conscious adoption of a low standard—which is the measure of his present degradation:—

“For once—ev'n to the height—I honour'd him”

His half jesting, half serious threat—

“Press this a little closer, sweet, until——”

agrees with what we have seen of the hard and cruel side of his character. It is a true account of what

might be expected of him. Regardless of her feelings, he has made an open boast of his selfish maxim—"We love but while we may"—that is, just while it suits us and no longer. He knows well that, in justice, the freedom which he claims for himself should extend to her also. But, were she to claim it, as he has already done in the case of her namesake, and sacrifice him to some rival, he knows that he has it in him to rise up and slay her with those same hands which are now bringing jewels to adorn her.

Before the poem closes we are treated to one of our poet's graceful and artistic lyrical pieces, wherein Tristram sings his own funeral dirge, and writes an epitaph for his own tomb :—

"Ay, ay, O ay—the winds that bend the brier !
A star in heaven, a star within the mere ;
Ay, ay, O ay—a star was my desire,
And one was far apart and one was near :
Ay, ay, O ay—the winds that bow the grass !
And one was water, and one star was fire,
And one will ever shine, and one will pass.
Ay, ay, O ay—the winds that move the mere !"

If we might coin a title for this song, we should call it "The Two Stars,"—namely, Tristram's star and Arthur's star. It is the selfish Epicureanism of Tristram set over against the Faith in the unseen of Arthur.

The "winds that bend the brier—that bow the grass

—that move the mere"—are the winds of human passion which have such power over all that is merely the offspring of earth. "A star was my desire,"—for some object of ambition and pursuit I must have : something, be it bad or good, for the restless cravings of my nature to fasten upon and follow after.

"A star in heaven—far apart—fire,"—is Arthur's star ; that unearthly standard of perfection which he set up, to be always striven after and never reached in this world. This will "ever shine."

The "star within the mere—near—water," is Tristram's star :—that hollow and vain phantom, shifting with the ever-shifting sea of human passion, like a reflected image in troubled waters : ay, and part and parcel of that sea, not, like Arthur's star, fixed and external to it.

And this star "will pass," and—may we not add ?—will carry with it, as happens in a few moments to the hapless Tristram, its own blinded worshippers.

All through this poem we find a minute observance of the artistic unities. The present scene commences as the sun is low on the horizon before setting.—

"———— Down in a casement sat,
A low sea-sunset glorying round her hair."

The setting sun marks the point at which we have arrived in the unfolding of the general drama. The

fine sunset is in harmony with the joy of the re-united lovers.

As the scene hastens to its close the progress of time is clearly marked.

"Then, *in the light's last glimmer*, Tristram show'd——"

It is the last glimmer of joy and happiness for Isolt, and the last of hope and life for Tristram ; and so in unconscious prophecy he describes his gift as

"————— his last
Love-offering and peace-offering unto thee."

But the shadow which rises behind him, when the fatal moment has arrived, is "*out of the dark*."

Contrast with this the return of Arthur. He is sick at heart at the unworthy conduct of his knights, and full of sad forebodings for the future.

And he returns, to find far worse in store for him than anything he had yet felt or dreamt of. The faithful, watching Dagonet, and the expectant reader, are hushed in anxiety to know where and how he will make the inevitable discovery. The weather and the hour must sympathize. he comes

"All in a death-dumb, autumn-dripping gloom."

"

- A general unity of purpose and expression, a strict and artistic subordination of diverse details to the one

central idea, appear everywhere in this Idyll, and constitute a leading excellence in it. And indeed I venture to think that the poem is superior, both in conception and in execution, to any of the later-written Idylls, and forms a fitting prelude to those last and greatest poems—"Guinevere," and the "Passing of Arthur."





CHAPTER X.

GUINEVERE.



AUTUMN is over, and winter has set in. The close to which the story is now hastening is sombre and sad. A weeping woman comes before us in the opening lines of the poem. Accordingly, it is outwardly no cheery and bright winter to which the poet introduces us:—

“The white mist, like a face-cloth to the face,
Clung to the dead earth, and the land was still.”

The heyday of youth is long past. The girlish delight of those long, delightful rides, day after day, among the flowers and warbling birds of spring, with Lancelot by her side, when as yet no sin was dreamed, * had been succeeded by the wild delirium of passion, when Lancelot was all in all to the unfaithful wife.

And this again, as years rolled by, bringing with them experience and reflection, had given way to the more measured and calculating spirit of middle life. Guinevere's outburst of jealousy at the rumour of Lancelot's engagement revealed to both of them, if any revelation were needed, the frail and uncertain character of the sinful bond between them. And their own better spirits, at times at least, recoiled against it.—

“——— I for you
This many a year have done despite and wrong
To one whom ever, in my heart of hearts,
I did acknowledge nobler ”

And so Lancelot.—

“——— I needs must break
These bonds that so defame me ”

Warnings of the evil effect of their example on others have not been wanting, so that Lancelot feels that the only effect of high station and renown is

“To make men worse by making my sin known ”

And once, at least, the dreadful secret was on the point of open exposure, when Pelleas came to

“Blaze the crime of Lancelot and the Queen ”

The poem before us tells how Modred came to be associated in Guinevere's mind with her haunting dread.—

"She half foresaw that he, the subtle beast,
Would track her guilt until he found, and hers
Would be for evermore a name of scorn."

And with fading youth and waning passion conscience
begins to assert its claims more strongly :—

"——— The powers that tend the soul
To help it from the death that cannot die,
And save it even in extremes, began
To vex and plague her."

The absolute trust and confidence of the King, her
ever-faithful husband, become more and more a
reproach to her .—

"——— Many a time for hours
Beside the placid breathings of the King,
In the dead night, grim faces came and went
Before her, or a vague spiritual fear
Held her awake "

But the chains of long habit are not easily broken.
The love of Guinevere and Lancelot, unhallowed
though it be, has become a part of their very
selves :—

" Still they met and met "

The poet has greatly heightened the dramatic
power as well as the moral teaching of the last scene
between them, by making it their expressed intention
to part for ever on this very occasion. "One more
taste of the forbidden fruit ! one more draught of the

forbidden cup—and we will for ever put them from us.” But the avenging Nemesis—the shadow whose child’s presence has so often sent a cold thrill through the heart of Guinevere in those long midnight watchings “beside the placid breathings of the King”—now stands close beside, with uplifted sword, ready to strike. “Have you, indeed, so long eaten the forbidden fruit, and will you now put it from you, ere it turn to ashes in your grasp? Nay! Have you through these long years drunk the forbidden cup, and will you now turn from it ere it run itself to a sour end?” Nay! As you have sown, so must you reap.—

“Traitor, come out, ye are trapt at last”

Now that discovery and exposure are upon them, Lancelot forgets all their virtuous resolutions of parting for ever. Having been faithful to her through all those long years, he cannot now leave her in the hour of distress and shame —

“————— He said

‘Mine be the shame; mine was the sin but rise
And fly to my strong castle over seas
There will I hide thee till my life shall end,
There hold thee with my life against the world.’”

But with Guinevere it is different. She had already counted the cost, and fully made up her mind to free

herself and Lancelot from the sinful bonds between them : and she will not now falter or fail on account of any extra suffering which this new calamity may bring. And the open exposure, now imminent, only serves, in our poet's view, to exhibit herself to herself in a truer light. She realizes all the more fully the moral degradation from which she has now at length separated herself. Moreover, the grand struggle was to give him up. That over, what follows matters little to her. The bitterness of death is past. There is already a great gulf between her former and her present self. And this gulf she dare not, she will not, she cannot attempt to bridge over and to go back :—

“ She answered, ‘ Lancelot, wilt thou hold me so ?
Nay, friend, for we have taken our farewell ’ ”

Henceforward, come what may, Lancelot is to be only “ friend.” The poet seems here to set before us a calm and firm resolution which tells of large capacities and possibilities of progress in the future, now that the one great step has been made. The passionate and voluptuous woman has it in her, when purified by repentance and suffering, to become, as the close of the poem shows us, the calm and heavenly-minded nun and abbess.

Her intermediate stage of sad reflection upon the past in the nunnery is well put before us in her

answer to the little novice's prattling about Lancelot :—

“To which a mournful answer made the queen.
“ ‘ O, closed about by narrowing nunnery walls,
What knowest thou of the world, and all its lights
And shadows, all the wealth, and all the woe?
If ever Lancelot, that most noble knight,
Were for one hour less noble than himself,
Pray for him, that he scape the doom of fire,
And weep for her who drew him to his doom ’ ”

This is a very fine passage. There is a mournful and pathetic ring in the lines admirably adapted to the situation, and, withal, a measured and stately accent of command not unbecoming a queen addressing a simple child like the little novice, coupled with a sad and humble confession of human weakness and failure.

The farewell scene between Arthur and Guinevere is most justly celebrated. I will here make only one or two passing remarks on minor points connected with it.

The introductory passage, then, which brings Arthur upon the scene, is most artistically framed, and forms a very fitting prelude to enhance the effect of the magnificent declamation which follows.

The break in the middle of the King's speech is also very finely conceived and described —

“ He paused, and in the pause she crept an inch
Nearer, and laid her hands about his feet.
,

Far off a solitary trumpet blew.
Then, waiting by the doors, the war-horse neigh'd
As at a friend's voice—and he spake again."

This pause is very advantageous. It breaks the sustained monotony of the King's speech, and gives us time to draw breath and start afresh with renewed interest.

Arthur has said his say and unburdened his soul. He has unfolded, not without a noble indignation, the spoilt purpose of his life, and the sin which she has sinned. And now the trumpet calls him to his unknown fate, and the expectant neigh of his faithful steed, who recognizes the martial summons and inquires loudly for his master, reminds him that his time is short. Is there no place for that vast pity which fills him, and for the love which has wrought into his very life? To that pity and that love, the imploring action of his poor prostrate Queen, mutely protesting against the extreme severity of his last words, makes a silent appeal. Accordingly he begins again in a changed tone. Instead of an utterance of righteous indignation, we have now one full of loving forgiveness and sorrowful farewell.

The whole of this fine scene is rendered with great force and beauty, which is well sustained up to the end of the poem. Let us notice, ere we pass on, how the ideal King, who has all along been more or less of

an abstraction, finds here an utterance. His human suffering, his sorrowful indignation, his bitterness of soul, appeal strongly to our sympathies, and establish a common ground between us and him, so that we seem in this Idyll to get nearer to him than we have yet been able to do.





CHAPTER XI.

THE PASSING OF ARTHUR.

AS the story of the Idylls draws to a close it rids itself, by degrees, of all that host of minor characters, accessories and details, which the progressive unfolding of the drama had introduced upon the scene. In "Guinevere" the Court, with all its throng of knights, ladies, attendants, and miscellaneous persons and things, had passed away. Like the faithful Lancelot himself, it had already become a memory to the Queen, instead of a present reality.

In this Idyll Guinevere too has passed away, and carried with her not only those who ministered to her pleasure, who heightened her dignity, or deepened her fall, in life's earlier days, but even the nunnery and the nuns, the fasts, the alms-deeds, and the prayer which surrounded its sombre close. She is now to

Arthur only a remembrance and a regret. And so, though he yields not to despair, he comes before us in this last Idyll forlorn and sad. That which should have been the light around his heart and life, to lighten this dark world for him, is now the dark shadow which hangs over it like a pall, to chill its warmest ray, and deepen its deepest gloom. There is nothing left to long or strive for but some end, as honourable as may be, to it all :—

“ — Let us hence, and find or feel a way
Thro' this blind haze, which, ever since I saw
One lying in the dust at Almesbury,
Hath folded in the passes of the world.”

As we proceed with the perusal of the Idyll we find this simplifying process still in progress. Whereas, at first, besides the King, we see upon the scene Modred and the two opposing hosts, later there remain only Arthur and his faithful knight Bedivere. (Are there still any persons or things which have been introduced upon the stage in the course of the work, and remain unaccounted for? Where are the three fair, mysterious beings who stood in silence round the throne of Arthur at his coronation, and of whom we naturally expected to hear again? And what of the magic brand Excalibur, engraven with mystic legends on both sides, but of which we have only had the fulfilment and the interpretation of one? The poem

before us answers these questions while carefully maintaining its own intense simplicity of purpose and effect. Thereby the dignity and impressiveness of the picture, both in the last Idyll and in this one, are greatly aided. That flood of poetry which seemed to run shallower in some of the earlier poems, being spread over a wide area, and divided into numerous and half-independent rills, is now gathered up into a single stream, which is so much the more effective as it is deeper and more powerful.

Turning now to the details of the poem, we find, near the beginning, one more instance of our poet's fondness for prophetic dreams and forecasts of the future :—

“ There came on Arthur sleeping, Gawain, kill'd
 In Lancelot's war, the ghost of Gawain, blown
 Along a wandering wind, and past his ear
 Went, shrilling, ‘ Hollow, hollow, all delight !
 Hail, king ! to-morrow thou shalt pass away.
 Farewell ! there is an isle of rest for thee.
 And I am blown along a wandering wind—
 And hollow, hollow, hollow, all delight.’
 And fainter, onward, like wild birds that change
 Their season in the night, and wail their way
 From cloud to cloud, down the long wind the dream
 Shrill'd ; but in going mingled with dim cries
 Far in the moonlit haze among the hills,
 As of some lonely city sack'd by night,
 When all's lost, and wife and child, with wail,
 Pass to new lords.”

There is a sort of retributive justice in making it

the ghost of Gawain which has to proclaim the hollowness of that delight which the pleasure-seeking Gawain had all his life followed, together with the doom of restless wandering which is his own portion, while a happy rest awaits Arthur. The poet's idea in associating the vanishing apparition with the dim cries of the sacked city is, I imagine, this—that the inconstant Gawain is identified with, and as it were personifies to the King, that whole past dispensation of failure and ruin of which his ghost now announces the immediate close.¹

✓ The conduct and utterances of Bedivere throughout this Idyll are in harmony with what we saw of him in the "Coming of Arthur." { There, among all the various theories about the King's origin, he will have none but the straightforward and matter-of-fact account which makes him Uther's son: although there, as always, he revered his King to the full, and was ever ready to show this in action—

" Bold in heart, and act, and word, was he
Whenever slander breathed against the king—"

¹ The general idea involved in such a prophetic intimation, by a ghost or spirit, of the issue of a coming battle, is a familiar one. It is unnecessary to remind the reader of such parallel cases as that of Saul and the witch of Endor, in Scripture, or the visions of Richard III. and Richmond, or of Brutus, in Shakespeare.

Bedivere is a practical man. He is of a prosaic and unimaginative turn. He treats the ghost here much in the same spirit as those other marvels and portents connected with Arthur's birth. He does not believe in ghosts—it must have been only harmless elves or dreams. But dreams or elves or ghosts, it is all one to Bedivere ; here is work to be done. He hears the steps of Modred and the recreant knights—

“ Arise, go forth, and conquer as of old.”

His long reluctance again, later in the poem, to throw the sword is in strict agreement with the rest of his conduct. Instead of eager curiosity and speculation as to any possible wonders that may be evoked by the throwing of the King's far-famed brand, whose miraculous origin he relates, we see him reckoning up, from the common-sense side, the direct loss which will be involved. His allegiance to his King makes him hesitate to disobey. But if the King is sick, and knows not what he does, then no over-strained and fantastic notions of obedience, says the practical Bedivere, should be allowed to outweigh the real and substantial merits of the case.

The theatre on which the last battle is to be fought is portrayed in a fine descriptive passage—

“ A land of old upheaven from the abyss
By fire, to sink into the abyss again,

- Where fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt,
And the long mountains ended in a coast
Of ever-shifting sand, and, far away,
• The phantom circle of a moaning' sea."

This forms a most fitting introduction to the battle scene which follows. Herein, although the poet has been most careful not to obtrude any allegorical significance so far as to interfere with the reality and vividness of the picture, yet we shall hardly fail to recognize a spiritual meaning and analogy. Note a few of the leading points—the light burning at its lowest, the deathwhite mist, the chill, the formless fear, the shadows—and compare them with the "In Memoriam,"—

"Be near me *when my light is low*,
When the blood creeps, and the nerves prick," &c.

We cannot miss the allusion to the last struggle of the departing soul.

The "visions out of golden youth," and the "old ghosts" which "look in upon the battle"—are the long-past scenes and chapters in a man's life, which, at such a supreme moment, are said to come vividly back; some of which, alas, may be more like ghosts than golden visions.

The "shrieks after the Christ" of those who persist in looking up to heaven, through all the mist that environs them, show us one class of death-beds: and

the "oaths, insult, filth, and monstrous blasphemies," another and a far different kind. But here, as in some of his other allegorical descriptions, that we may have no excuse for missing the poet's meaning, he brings in, before closing his typical description, a more direct reference to the antitype—

"Last, as by some one death-bed, after wail
Of suffering silence follows," &c.

The close of the description, with the gradual inroad of the sea,—which comes rolling in, wave after wave, when the fight is over, and swallows up Christian and heathen alike—is very finely conceived and powerfully expressed. Here, again, lest we should miss the hidden meaning, a very strong hint to assist us is given in the last lines.—

"—— Rolling far along the gloomy shores,
The voice of days of old and days to be "

That is, the sea is the sea of *Time*; and the far-rolling sound of its surging tides is the manifold but speechless utterance of an eternal past, and an illimitable future.

In the speech which succeeds this fine description, the propriety and present reality of the picture seem, for a moment, to be imperilled, for the sake of a fuller development of its allegorical significance—a most unusual occurrence in these poems.

The Passing of Arthur.

III

"Hearest thou this great voice, that shakes the world,
And wastes the narrow realm whereon we move,
And beats upon the faces of the dead"

The gentle and gradual rising of the tide on a flat, sandy coast, as in the description which precedes, hardly brings with it a "great voice that shakes the world." This is rather the voice of that *Time* which pulls down and destroys all things, and is the agent in that gradual but mighty process that levels the mountain and fills up the valley, and—

l "Wastes the narrow realm whereon we move."

The spiritually-minded and reflective King is filled with anxious thoughts and inward questionings at the scene before him. The soul in the throes of its last dread struggle begins almost to doubt its own source and origin, its own immortal strength and supremacy.—

"—— I know not what I am,
Nor whence I am, nor whether I be King."

Bedivere, the practical man, is little disposed for discussion, metaphysical or otherwise; at all events, not while there is work to be done. He strikes in, once more, on the side of action:—

"——— Yonder stands
Modred *unharm'd*, the traitor of thine house"

When the poem lapses into the original and long-

previously published fragment of the *Morte d'Arthur*, the poet is not very careful to join the old and new work together without a perceptible break and transition. He retains his old introduction—

“So all day long the noise of battle roll'd
Among the mountains by the winter sea;
Until King Arthur's Table, man by man,
Had fall'n in Lyonesse about their Lord,
King Arthur.”

We are evidently intended to regard these lines as a sort of recapitulation of the preceding portion of the poem, summing up and dismissing it in order that our attention may be concentrated upon the last scene which follows, and to which the preceding portion is merely an introduction. The point is of small consequence, but it would seem to be open to question whether the force and vigour of the general narrative would not have been better maintained by omitting these four lines, and passing at once from “all but slain himself he fell,” to “Then because his wound was deep.” This course would, however, have involved the loss of the pause, and time for the reader to draw breath after the battle scene, which this retrospective summary presents. This is, no doubt, the poet's reason for the present arrangement.

It is unnecessary to weary the reader with many remarks upon the well-known poem, the *Morte*

✓ d'Arthur. The poetic genius of the author has been nowhere, perhaps, exhibited to greater advantage than here. He has shown a mastery of language, a descriptive power, a sustained command of lofty and harmonious rhythmical expression, combined with a certain archaic simplicity of narration, which have from the first exalted this poem to the highest rank. And the more modern and supplementary additions are by no means unworthy to take their place beside the older portion.

Before we leave the poem, let us once more notice the harmony and progress of the artistic unities. It is the depth of *winter*, with a chill, misty day for the battle. The night is bright and frosty round the closing scene. When the King has gone Bedivere stands watching

“————— Till the hull
Look'd one black dot against the verge of *dawn*.”

And at last he sees this speck

“————— go
From less to less, and vanish into light.
And *the new sun rose*, bringing *the new year*.”

And thus the cycle of our mystic year is complete.





CHAPTER XII.

ON THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE IDYLLS, AND THE LEADING IDEAS EMBODIED IN THE WORK

HAVING now gone through the several poems in detail, it would next seem desirable that we should take a rapid survey of the leading lines upon which they are laid out, with an eye to the apparent growth and development of the subject in the author's mind. This we judge of solely by the internal evidence which our survey has afforded us.

While still in the spring-tide of his genius and power the poet gave to the world, in the "Morte d'Arthur," a fragmentary presentment of a fine scene which had especially attracted his attention when engaged in studying the old legendary stories of King Arthur and his knights. Already, apparently, there was floating in his mind the vague and general outline

of a great poem, or series of connected poems, in which Arthur should appear as the ideal hero, surrounded by the knights of his Round Table; and in which the growth, the fortunes, and the eventual ruin and break-up of this Table should be depicted. Though in some of the details of the "Morte d'Arthur" we were not left without glimpses of an allegorical significance, yet the entire interest of the poem was concentrated upon the actual realistic picture, the fine study of the departing King.)

The great success and popularity of this most beautiful poem no doubt encouraged the poet to further progress in the same direction; and in due course appeared the volume containing the four well-known poems, "Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine," and "Guinevere." Here we were presented with four studies of feminine character; two of them forming what we may term lights in the general picture, and the other two, in their different degrees, being the contrasted shadows

That the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere was the guiding thread upon which the poet was stringing the successive instalments of his work was clearly apparent in these poems, notably in "Elaine" and "Guinevere." And here, again, any allegorical significance, though not perhaps absolutely excluded, was in no way whatever put forward to our notice. But

●

as time went on, and the work grew beneath his hands, the poet would appear to have seen more clearly the analogy between his ideal hero—who struggles ever after a high and lofty object, in spite of the hindering and downward-tending influences which incessantly surround him—and the progress of the human soul in its upward strivings, ever dragged downwards by the things of earth, and yet ever, if it be true to its true destiny, struggling upwards in pursuit of an unattainable standard of perfection.

Thus Arthur's life-long warfare is a warfare—to use the poet's own words—

✓ “Shadowing Sense at war with Soul.”

And so in the two later volumes, which appeared after a long interval, our author has, as it were, taken up this analogy, and woven it more deeply into the structure of the remaining Idylls. In three only, however, out of these five poems does it appear to any very marked extent, as we saw while considering them in detail. In the later and supplementary additions to the original poem of the “Morte d'Arthur” it also comes out with tolerable distinctness. Whether, however, in the case of the newer poems, or of these additions to an old one, we may say that this allegorical complexion is of a more or less pronounced character, according to the circumstances of the situ-

ation ; that situation being drawn out in harmony with, and in due subordination to, the original design and structure of the work, as marked out by the four previous Idylls.

Since, therefore, out of the whole ten poems there are only three, and those written in the poet's later years, in which the allegory appears to any very noticeable degree, we seem to be justified in considering this side of the subject as an afterthought, more or less, as engrafted upon the general scheme, rather than as forming an integral and essential part of it.

It may fairly, perhaps, be open to argument whether the poet in taking this course has or has not added to the artistic propriety and completeness, and furthered the general success, of the whole work. The fragmentary and occasional introduction of the allegory, which disappears for long periods, and then crops up again when we least expect it, can, so far, be hardly other than objectionable. But, then, it has seldom or never been so forced upon our notice as to interfere with that distinct, tangible, and realistic presentment of the subject which is so necessary if the reader's attention and interest are to be engaged and sustained by a powerful and truthful picture. The additional food for thought, and material for our curiosity and insight to exercise themselves upon, which are afforded by this allegorical side of the subject, are an advantage

to the work, and perhaps worth the price at which they are purchased, in the shape of a little occasional obscurity and partial drag upon the straightforward course of the narrative.

(On the whole, then, it appears that the leading thread of connection, the framework upon which the whole structure of the Idylls is built up, is the gradual ruin of Arthur's noble design ; and this as mainly caused by, and identified with, the sin of his queen. And a second, but minor and more partial connecting link, is the allegorical significance—the warfare of the human soul in its strivings after perfection—which lies hidden beneath the surface of the work.)





CHAPTER XIII.

COMPARATIVE ESTIMATE OF THE DIFFERENT POEMS.

HAVING considered the general outline and purpose of these poems as a whole, we may next, perhaps, say a few words upon their individual and comparative excellence as works of art.

It will, I think, be generally admitted that the two finest poems of the series are the two last, "Guinevere" and the "Passing of Arthur."

These both possess the great artistic advantage of a general simplicity and unity of effect. The farewell scene between Arthur and his queen, in "Guinevere," is conceived in so lofty a spirit, and carried out with such perfection and beauty, that it suffices to elevate the poem to the first rank. No such single and striking picture is put before us in the "Passing of Arthur;" but then the whole poem is so beautiful,

and worked out from beginning to end in such a masterly manner, that if a comparison is to be made we must, I think, assign to it the leading rather than the second place.

Leaving these two well-known Idylls, it is difficult, in considering the merits of the others, to hold an even balance between the claims of the older poems, with which we have been familiar for years, and those more modern and recent pieces which were published after our first interest in the Idylls had worn out. It is difficult to form the fair comparative judgment which we might do if we were reading all the poems for the first time, but, if a selection is to be made, I am disposed to place "Vivien" next. This choice will no doubt surprise many or most readers, on a cursory view of the subject. There is no poem, out of the whole ten, which one would be so likely, perhaps, when opening the volumes for half-an-hour's casual reading, to pass over, or even to turn from with repugnance, as "Vivien." The heroine is an unattractive object in herself, and we feel instinctively that we are likely to find more pleasant and profitable objects of interest and study elsewhere. But in forming a comparative estimate of the merits of the Idylls or any other poems, we must be content to subordinate our partiality for our favourite characters and situations to our appreciation of the intrinsic poetic and

artistic excellence of the poems themselves. Moreover, Mr. Tennyson displays such a highly cultivated taste and careful artistic feeling in all his works, even in the minutest details, that he must not complain if they are judged of as works of art by that high standard to which he has himself so largely assisted to educate us. Now, there is in "Vivien" an artistic unity and completeness of effect, a consistent working out of one single idea, combined with a sustained power in the detailed treatment, for which we look in vain elsewhere. Since, then, we have here this artistic perfection combined with a higher average of poetic strength and general excellence, I propose to sacrifice any personal preference for the more interesting and affecting scenes and characters to be found in other Idylls, and give this poem the next place.

The same remarks apply, though in a modified shape and in a less degree, to the "Last Tournament." Here the central idea of the poem is of a more hidden character. Instead of the unity of expression conferred by the objective presentment of a single personified type of character in a Vivien, we have here a subjective and internal unity, depending upon a study of degradation of character in different individuals, and under different conditions. But, as we saw when examining the poem in detail, this one central idea is worked out generally, though not perhaps

everywhere, with power, and with conspicuous harmony and perfection of grouping in the natural surroundings which form the artistic background of the picture. Moreover, there is a certain mournful and pathetic undercurrent of feeling, a sad yet sympathizing confession of human weakness and failure, which lend dignity and pathos to this poem. But, before we make up our minds to place it next in order, we must consider the claims of "Elaine."

With many readers the latter would probably be ranked unhesitatingly before either "Vivien" or "The Last Tournament." But here, as before, we modify our appreciation of the pure and tender character of "Elaine" by our estimate of the general dramatic and poetic excellence of the whole work. It cannot be denied that the subject—the one strong and manly form of Lancelot set between the two contrasted feminine types, the two women who love him, is most interesting in itself, and wrought out not without forcible and beautiful passages and scenes. But then the poem travels over much and varied ground; our interest is spread and dissipated over many minor or episodical matters, collateral to, rather than directly bearing upon, the main issue. This we might pardon, for I am by no means prepared to advocate a blind and unreasoning thralldom to rigid and over-strained canons of artistic propriety. But again, in places the

poetry, judged by the standard of the poet's own performances elsewhere, seems somewhat weak and mediocre. The poem lacks force, together with unity and simplicity of scope and effect. It is weak just in those points where "Vivien" is strongest. Admitting, however, its claims to our consideration on account of the beauty of the pictures which it leaves behind in our memories, we will rank it after "Vivien," with "The Last Tournament" closely following.

Of the five poems remaining to be considered, let us next take four—"Gareth and Lynette," "Enid," "The Holy Grail," and "Pelleas and Ettarre." Each of these poems has its own merits, and each, I think, its own drawbacks and defects. For a consideration of some of these we must refer to our detailed examination of the different poems. It is difficult to form a comparative estimate of works so diverse in conception, and of such varied and partial excellence in execution. In the three first we have long poems taking us over a great deal of ground, whereas in "Pelleas" we have a shorter and simpler piece.

Of the four I propose to place "Gareth" and "Enid" before the other two, the former on account mainly of its sustained animation and liveliness of tone throughout, and the sparkling beauty and felicity of some of its descriptions—the latter because of the tender beauty and sweetness of the portraiture of Enid.

The "Holy Grail" we will put before "Pelleas and Ettarre." Many readers, having regard to the greater unity and simplicity both of design and execution in the latter, may think that, following our own critical canons, we ought to rank this poem higher. I have not done so on account of what would seem to be its general comparative weakness and deficiency in poetic power and genius. For, as before, although a strict maintenance of artistic unities, a due and proper subordination and proportion in all the parts to conduce to the one effect, a simplicity and unity of structure, are all very desirable things in their way, and tend to enhance the artistic value and general effect of a poem, yet it would be the height of folly and pedantry to allow them to be a substitute for poetry.

There now only remains the first Idyll of all, the "Coming of Arthur." This is a poem of an historical and supplementary character, added to make the whole series more complete by introducing Arthur and Guinevere in due form upon the stage. As the poem is so short, and so much of it taken up with historical details, it would not be fair to expect that it should rouse our sympathy and admiration as much as the later ones, the themes of which are chosen more with an eye to their capacities in this direction.

It seems, therefore, in no way disrespectful to it to place it last in the series.



CHAPTER XIV.

THE ANACHRONISM IN THE IDYLLS.

IT appears to be a somewhat doubtful question whether "King Arthur" is to be regarded as an historical personage—a real man, whose actions and character have merely been enhanced and embellished by the magnifying power of oral tradition, of popular favour, of romance and minstrel song—or whether he is altogether a myth. The examination of such a question is better suited to the elaborate pages of critical historians, or the discussions of learned antiquarians, than to such a slight essay as the present. It is sufficient for us to regard him as the traditional hero of the struggle between Christian Celt and Infidel Saxon, as the embodiment of the ideal yearnings and aspirations, the national and patriotic strivings, of the more poetic and imaginative, but vanquished race. The conquerors

did not extinguish the story. The chivalrous Normans were powerfully attracted by it, took it up, enriched, and ornamented it. Every fresh minstrel who repeated the legends added fresh details and further romantic embellishments of his own ; until the original basis of fact, if such there were, became altogether buried and lost amid the manifold additions, changes, and variations, so caused.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, and Walter de Map, the authors whose names are most prominently associated with the original collections of such legendary stories from which these Idylls are extracted, lived in an age when the marvellous, the wonderful, and the romantic, ruled supreme over the truth and fidelity of history. Historical romance, such as would please the ears of the Court ladies in the days of the Norman kings in the twelfth century, must be clothed in the romantic dress of Norman chivalry. It must be tinged with frosy colour stolen from Eastern skies, and warmed with rays borrowed from an Eastern sun. It must be adapted, that is, to minds trained in the school of the Crusades, and accustomed, more or less, to the gorgeous imagery and fertile imagination with which the Crusaders were brought in contact. Moreover, the legends would hardly have been fully suited to such prejudiced and uncritical listeners, without a large infusion of the miraculous, the mystical, and the

superstitious, in accordance with the religious ideas of those days. In so far, therefore, as Mr. Tennyson has worked upon the lines thus traced out for him by the original authors or compilers of these legends, we are not surprised to find innumerable historical anachronisms in the details of the poems. In their costume and general surroundings King Arthur and his knights are half-a-dozen centuries in advance of their age. Instead of the mud huts, the sheepskin garb, and the rude weapons of a set of barbarous islanders in the sixth century, we find the fortresses and castles, the splendid silks of foreign looms, the tournaments, the shields, the helmets, the greaves and the cuisses of the twelfth and later centuries

No doubt in capacity for poetic and artistic treatment, and for ornate embellishment, this romance and chivalry, this pomp and ceremony, borrowed from the later age, have been far more to Mr Tennyson's taste, and far better adapted to his genius, than the rude simplicity of the earlier.

But the legends of "King Arthur," as melted down in the crucible of our poet's imagination, and sent forth again cast in a fresh mould, and stamped with his new mark, show a worse anachronism than this.

It is no mere question of scenic and artistic details and surroundings. It is the inner life and spirit which is changed. If the Idylls are half-a-dozen centuries

after date in the details of the picture, they are a whole dozen in its conception and meaning.

Instead of the mental sphere and horizon, the habits and modes of thought, the mind and spirit of the sixth or even of the twelfth century, we find those of the eighteenth or nineteenth.

Let us take a few instances in illustration. The "Last Tournament," in its very name, and in all its details, is an illustration of our first point—of the anachronism in scenic accessories and surroundings. We find in it all the well-known vocabulary of the chivalrous contests of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—the jousts, the umpire, the lists, the helmets, the plumes, and the ladies' colours.

Turning to the second point, the philosophic speech of Tristram, on taking the prize, strikes us, perhaps, as rather curious, coming, as it does, from a knight of old in the supreme moment of victory—

"————— Strength of heart
And might of limb, but mainly use and skill,
Are winners in this pastime of our king.

* * * * *

"Great brother, *thou nor I have made the world.*
Be happy in thy fair queen, as I in mine "

But a better illustration occurs in the scene between Tristram and Dagonet. Listen to the following :—

"—— Being fool, and seeing too much wit,
Makes the world rotten; why, belike I skip
To know myself the wisest knight of all.

"—— Did ye mark that fountain yesterday
Made to run wine? but this had run itself
All out, like a long life, to a sour end

"Swine? I have wallow'd. I have wash'd, *the world*
Is flesh and shadow, I have had my day.
The dirty nurse, Experience, in her kind
Hath foul'd me, an I wallowed, then I wash'd
I have had my day and my philosophies—
And, thank the Lord, I am King Arthur's fool "

Instead of the rude horse-play, and coarse sallies of wit, which might be expected from a Court fool in the sixth century, assuming the possibility of such a being's existence in those early days, we see here the acute self-analysis of a matured and highly developed civilization.

In Tristram, again, we recognize the inward questionings of a cultivated mind, nurtured in modern habits of thought, and modern influences, social, moral, and religious. He is a pleasure-seeking man, but as we said when considering this Idyll, he is not without a certain moral and philosophic insight into his own character and position, as well as those of the Round Table. He lays down general principles in his conversations with Dagonet and Isolt, in a way which

smacks very strongly of the modern analytical spirit.
Thus :—

“————— O my soul, be comforted,
If this be sweet to sin in leading-strings,
If here be comfort, and if ours be sin,” &c.

And still further —

“————— Lied, say ye? Nay, *but learnt*
The vow that binds too strictly snaps itself—
My knighthood taught me this—ay, being snapt,
We run more counter to the soul thereof
Than had we never sworn. I swear no more :
I swore to the great king, and am forsworn.

* * * * *

“————— The vows !
O, ay—the *wholesome madness of an hour—*
They served their use, their time, for every knight
Believed himself a greater than himself,
And every follower eyed him as a god,
Till he, *being lifted up beyond himself,*
Did mightier deeds than otherwise he had done
And so the realm was made.”

In “Enid,” again, the whole conception and course of the poem is alien to the spirit of an age in which woman was a piece of property, to be bought and sold, to be alternately petted or coerced, at the caprice of a rude and barbarous master. Coming to details, let us glance at the interview between Enid and the old lover Limours.

“Then rose Limours, and, *looking at his feet,*
Like him who tries the bridge he fears may fail,

Crest and came near, lifted adoring eyes,
Bow'd at her side, and utter'd, whisperingly :
' Enid, the pilot-star of my lone life ;
Enid, my early and my only love ;
Enid, the loss of whom has turn'd me wild.' "

Here the name, the character, and the conduct of the dissolute Limours are more like those of a French courtier in the reign of Louis XIV. than such as we should expect to find, if any approach to historical truth and fidelity were aimed at. The rude warrior of the sixth century would probably have been content to let his neighbour's wife alone ; but, if not, he would doubtless have knocked the inconvenient husband on the head with his club, and carried her off in triumph. The idea of approaching her "*whisperingly*," with a low bow, to consult her upon the question, would never have entered his head.

But it is useless to multiply instances. The whole character and status of woman in the Idylls, and the attitude towards her of the other sex, tell of that elevation of womanhood, which was only achieved in comparatively modern times, as the result of long centuries of Christianity and progressive enlightenment.

We rise then from a perusal of these poems with the conviction that the characters therein depicted are no nearer to those which we should expect to find in the days of the ancient Britons, than the critical and

philosophic pages of a modern Niebuhr are to the simple and childlike narrative of Herodotus, or the subtle metaphysical discrimination of our latest nineteenth century poet, Robert Browning, to the "Iliad" of Homer.

The question now arises: is our poet to blame, or not, in taking the line which he has done, and submitting to this glaring anachronism?

It would certainly appear that we are not justified in laying too much stress upon the question of historical inaccuracy. History, properly speaking, there is none in the case. The poet selects, out of a mass of wild and often contradictory legends, such as best suit his purpose. These describe the ways and doings of a set of romantic and ideal persons. To idealize a step further, and invest these persons with attributes and ideas beyond the age even of the later authors of the legends themselves, is, after all, only following in their own footsteps.

Perhaps a great poet, largely gifted with creative genius and power, might have given us a totally different presentment of Arthur and his times, dispensing with all these side lights, whether borrowed from chivalry, romance, and monkish superstition, or from the intellectual and moral experiences of a later and more conventional age. In this case, inasmuch as it would hardly be possible to dispense altogether with the

Norman and chivalrous element, the story would be cast in a mould later indeed, but not markedly or extravagantly later, than would be the case if strict fidelity to the historical era were to be attempted. But Mr. Tennyson has, no doubt, better consulted the taste of the large majority of his nineteenth century readers, by taking the somewhat lower and weaker line which he has actually taken, in engrafting nineteenth century notions upon the original stock supplied him by the legends. And doubtless, also, in so doing he has best adapted his treatment of his subject to his own genius and poetical attainments

This brings us to the consideration of a further and wider question : what are the general conclusions which we are to draw from our study of the Idylls as to the author's peculiar characteristics and poetical position ? This will form the subject of the next chapter.





CHAPTER XV.

ON SOME LEADING CHARACTERISTICS AND PECULIAR EXCELLENCES OF THE POET, AS EXEMPLIFIED IN THE IDYLLS.

WE said in the introductory chapter that a leading characteristic of these poems is the lofty moral tone throughout. We find here no false morality. No deceitful glamour of genius is thrown over the debased and the impure; no gilded cup is held out to us, fair and glittering to the eye, but full of poison within. There is hardly a line in the whole of these ten Idylls which the most modest eye need shun.

This is the more noticeable, and so much the more commendable, on account of the nature of the subject. For here, as elsewhere in our poet's works, love is the prevailing theme. Mr. Tennyson is emphatically the poet of the affections.

That he is by no means incapable of appreciating,

or putting fairly before us the more sensuous and passionate side of his subject is here abundantly testified by passages in "Vivien" or the "Last Tournament." But Vivien, with her baleful and fascinating impurity, is but the necessary foil to the pure and sweet Elaine, and similarly Isolt to Enid. When the artistic proprieties, or the requirements of the general situation, make it necessary to bring these more objectionable characters before us, the sensuous detail of the picture is never allowed to degenerate into sensuality, or the faithful exhibition of sin and shame into their glorification.

And here, alas! Mr. Tennyson shines the brighter by contrast with many a gifted author.

This is especially noticeable in that which, if the views which have been here put forward be correct, constitutes the guiding thread in the whole work—namely, the progress, the disastrous influence, and the result of the sinful relation between Guinevere and Lancelot. This dark shadow in the picture is everywhere in the background, but very seldom brought immediately before us. It may be that the pure-minded poet shrinks from dealing directly with it. To such an extent is this reticence carried, that it seems to interfere seriously with the proper unfolding and due proportions of the drama. But this point ~~we~~ will discuss later. Our present position is, that, for what-

ever reason, the poet has actually treated this vitally important but delicate part of his subject with the utmost propriety.

Such themes as this—the guilty passion of Guinevere and Lancelot, partly redeemed by his lifelong devotion and unswerving loyalty to her through all his own conscious degradation and failure, the careless pleasure-seeking of the inconstant Tristram, Isolt with her deep heart-yearnings and fond memories of another than her husband—these must be set on the darker side of the subject; and with them, as we have said, the poet is not incapable of dealing. He can show us love shining with sadly-dimmed lustre through the “base wildfire light” and lurid glare of *passion*: but his delight is in the “still and sacred fire,” as he has termed it, of a pure and tender *affection*. On this side of the picture we see Arthur, with his lofty ideas of the dignity of woman, proclaiming her magic influence in elevating and ennobling man,—Enid, timid and reserved, but devoted in affection to her imperious and self-willed lord,—the sweet Elaine, with her romantic attachment to the one-day-seen Lancelot,—Pelleas, with his enthusiastic dreams, and his devotion to an unknown ideal.

On the whole it appears that love and the play of the affections have a very large share in the general scheme of the Idylls. In all his works, this is the side

of human nature which the poet most affects, and with which he, no doubt, feels himself best fitted to deal. And the purity and beauty of these lights in the general picture is only thrown into proper relief by the free introduction, with a just-not-too-realistic treatment, of those darker shadows.

Further leading excellences of the poet, which we see well exemplified in the *Idylls*, are his profound feeling for outward nature, and his refined and highly-cultivated artistic taste. I mention these two apparently distinct points together, because, when combined, they result in a careful and studied harmony between the scenes and processes of outward nature and the human actions involved in, and human emotions and sympathies to be evoked by, the progressive development of the general drama. The careful observance of these unities has been everywhere conspicuous during our detailed perusal of the poems; so that we need only summarize here. The year with its varied changes of time, season, and weather is unfolded gradually before our eyes in a panoramic cycle.¹

In the "Coming of Arthur" it is the night of the New Year, wherein the King is born. With the setting in of spring comes the bright promise of the

¹ Compare "Contemporary Review," May, 1873, p. 938.

early kingdom ; and Gareth starts full of lusty youth and hope in very early *morn*, with the birds warbling around and above him.

Next we see the lovely bride, Guinevere, arriving among the flowers in May, herself the loveliest flower of all, and Arthur standing by her side that *morn* at the altar, with his newly founded Round Table about him, rejoicing in his joy. In "Enid" and "Vivien" the increasing heat of summer is accompanied by a gathering tide of passion and corruption. In "Elaine" and the "Holy Grail" we have Arthur's noble purpose and commanding influence still struggling mightily against it. But just as the early freshness and bloom of the landscape have faded away before the torrid heats of later summer, so has the bright promise of those early days been in great part marred by the evil glow of passion, and dark possibilities of failure and ruin are now looming ominously in the background.

"Pelleas and Ettarre" is the last of the summer Idylls. At first it brings a bright gleam of hope and *sunshine*, like a swallow's summer, into the picture, corresponding to the purity and truth of the enthusiastic Pelleas. But this only serves to deepen by contrast the dark shadow caused by the false Ettarre, harmonizing with the gloom in which the poem closes.

Then comes the "Last Tournament," with its autumn gleam, and gloom, and shower; with its fading fields telling of the faded and departing glories of the Round Table, with its "*last glimmer*" of daylight speaking of darkened prospects and banished hopes.

Then "Guinevere," with its chill and gloomy *winter evening* setting in, harmonizing well with that sad scene in the nunnery, and the sombre close of a voluptuous day.

Lastly, the "Passing of Arthur," wherein a departing King and a dissolving Round Table come before us with moonlight on the frozen hills of *mid-winter*, and vanish from our sight with *midnight*, and a new sunrise bringing a new year.

In all this, besides the poet's cultivated artistic taste in harmony, proportion, and arrangement, we cannot fail to recognize the working of his profound sympathy with outward nature, and capacity for receiving and reproducing impressions from her.

Let us next examine this feature in his poetic constitution in connection with some other of his excellences: namely, his keen insight, his vivid pictorial power, and faithfulness of observation and memory, in laying hold of details and reproducing them for us in terse and telling language. Here we have the conditions necessary for the production of numerous

striking landscapes, descriptions, and illustrations, based upon a close study of the scenes and processes of outward nature; together with an abundance of telling epithets, similes, and metaphors, which we find scattered about the poems. In such minor matters as these last, the process is most frequent and marked: for, in accordance with what we said of the general character of the poet's genius in the introductory chapter, he generally depicts Nature in detail, rather than in her larger, her wilder, or grander scenes. Thus, however, is constituted an important and effective feature in Mr. Tennyson's poetry.

It may be worth while to bring together under one view passages which show the different lines in which the poet's genius has travelled in this direction.

Let us look first, then, at his power of depicting water and marine effects in the following passages.—

“————— A brook

With one sharp rapid, where the cringing white
Play'd ever back upon the sloping wave,
And took both ear and eye.”

I heard the shingle *grinding in the surge.*”

“The heathen—but that ever-climbing wave,
Hurl'd back again so often in empty foam,
Hath lain for years at rest.”

“The long, low dune, and lazy-plunging sea.”

" Fall, as the crest of some slow-arching wave,
Heard in dead night along that table-shore,
Drops flat, and, after the great waters break,
Whitening for half a league, and thin themselves
Far over sands, marbled with moon and cloud,
From less and less, to nothing, thus he fell."

" Those far-rolling, westward-smiling seas "/

" — Loud south-westerns, rolling ridge on ridge
The buoy that rides at sea, and dips and springs
For ever "

" So dark a forethought roll'd about his brain,
As on a dull day, in an ocean cave,
The blind wave, *feeling round his long sea-hall*
In silence "

" O, did you never lie upon the shore,
And watch the curl'd white of the coming wave
Glass'd in the slippery sand before it breaks ? "

" ——— All together down upon him
Bare, as a wild wave in the wide north sea,
Green-glimmering toward the summit, bears, with all
Its stormy crests, that smoke against the skies,
Down on a bark "

" As the sharp wind, that ruffles all day long
A little bitter pool about a stone
On the bare coast "

" ——— Aghast the maiden rose,
White as her veil, and stood before the queen
As tremulously as foam, upon the beach,
Stands in a wind, ready to break and fly "

Studies in the Idylls.

" ——— The long mountains ended in a coast
Of ever-shifting sand, and, far away,
The phantom circle of a moaning sea."

The poet's close and minute study of outward nature, and power of faithful reproduction of details, appear in the following :—

" ——— Hair
All over glanced with dew-drop, or with gem,
Like sparkles in the stone Avanturine."

" ——— Nigh upon that hour,
When the lone hern forgets his melancholy,
Lets down his other leg, and, stretching, dreams
Of goodly supper in the distant pool "

" ——— As the dog, withheld
A moment from the vermin that he sees
Before him, *shivers*, ere he springs and kills."

" — All talk died, as in a grove all song
Beneath the shadow of some bird of prey."

" ——— Monstrous ivy-stems
Claspt the grey walls with hairy-fibred arms
And suck'd the joining of the stones, and look'd
A knot, beneath, of snakes, aloft a grove "

" They vanish'd panic-stricken, like a shoal
Of darting fish, that on a summer morn
Adown the crystal dykes at Camelot,
Come *slipping o'er their shadows on the sand*;))
But, if a man who stands upon the brink
But lift a shining hand against the sun,
There is not left the twinkle of a fin
Betwixt the cressy islets white in flower."

"——— The myriad cricket of the mead,
When its own voice clings to each blade of grass,
And every voice is nothing."

"Hid from the wide world's rumour by the grove
Of poplars, with their noise of falling showers,
And ever-tremulous aspen trees, he lay."

A careful study of the sequence of cause and effect in these natural phenomena is sometimes very marked : thus—

"A cripple, one that held a hand for alms,
Hunch'd as he was, and like an old dwarf élm,
That *turns its back on the salt blast*"

"——— A man of mien
Wan-sallow, as the plant that *feels itself*
Root-bitten by white h:hen "

"——— Gareth loosed the stone
From off his neck, then in the mere beside
Tumbled it, *oilily bubbled up the mere.*"

There is a semi-scientific smack about these three similes. In the two first of them we might be listening to the skilled gardener or botanist, and in the last there is an echo of the chemist, telling us of the production of marsh-gas or carbonic oxide in stagnant pools, impregnated with decomposing vegetable matter. Here the gas, on agitation, is visible, ~~dis-~~engaged, and rises lazily, or "oilily" as the poet puts it,

to the surface, being of a high specific gravity, so that its buoyancy is small.

Take another instance :—

“———— A splendid silk of foreign loom,
Where, like a shoaling sea, the lovely blue
Play'd into green, and thicker down the front
With jewels than the sward with drops of dew,
When, all night long, a cloud clings to the hill,
And with the dawn, ascending, lets the day
Strike where it clung—so thickly shone the gems.”

Here we get a similar scientific reference to the process by which dew is deposited.

Once more :—

“———— The gloom
That follows on the turning of the world,
Darken'd the common path.”

Here Mr. Tennyson has an evident eye to astronomy, and the revolution of the solar system, as before to botany or chemistry.

Lastly, let us glance at his acquaintance with the laws of optics. In the following passages he shows us how the apparent size of objects is magnified in a partial, misty, or uncertain light.

As by moonlight .—

“Stared at her towers that, *larger than themselves*
In their own darkness, throng'd into the moon.”

“———— Looking, as he walk'd,
Larger than human on the frozen hills.”

Or, again, by mist :—

“The moony vapour rolling round the king,
Who seem'd the phantom of a *giant* in it.”

Or by twilight .—

“A huge pavilion, *like a mountain peak*,
Sunder the glooming crimson on the marge ”

In the above and other similar passages which occur in his other works, the poet has opened up a new field, on a small scale, by exhibiting to us, in elegant and telling language, the poetical side of that balanced correlation of cause and effect which is everywhere visible to the scientific eye in the phenomena of outward nature ¹

¹ Compare the remarks of Mr. Devcy, “Est. of Mod Eng Poets,” p 279, *et seq*





CHAPTER XVI.

FURTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF MR TENNYSON'S POETRY WITH REFERENCE TO SOME APPARENT DRAWBACKS OR DEFECTS IN THE IDYLLS

IN our detailed perusal of these poems we refrained, for the most part, from any adverse criticism. We gave ourselves up to the poet, to be led whither he listed, with an unquestioning loyalty. But, having now enabled him fully to unfold his design, we are fairly in a position to turn round and look at the whole work *ab extra*—to examine it from our own standpoint, that is, rather than the poet's, and with an eye to its defects, if such there be, rather than, as before, to its beauties and perfections.

~~If we~~ were now to attempt to sum up in one word those poetic and artistic requirements in which the

whole work seems to be most deficient, that word would be, I think, breadth.

There is an absence of general solidarity—to use that new-fashioned and cumbrous, but useful word—in the whole work. Whether it be a question of the original conception of the general drama in the poet's mind, of the more detailed conception of each separate poem, of the portraiture of the different characters, of the grouping and correlation of the incidents, or of the minor ornamentation of simile and epithet, I recognize everywhere the same want. There is an absence of a consistent, clearly-defined programme of action and character in the poet's mind. To such a programme everything should subserve ; and all that interferes with it, however attractive in itself, should be pruned away.

These poems seem to be built up by a process of *accretion*, more or less, like a coral reef, or of *superimposition*, like a child's palace of bricks ; instead of being unfolded like a many-branched plant from one single root, or evolved by a consistent and uniform internal development, like a living organism. *Breadth* of conception and of treatment would, it would seem, have prevented this, and is in the main the missing element.

But perhaps the reader will be disposed to ask at once whether a considerable part of our time and

space here has not been devoted to tracing out the connection between the poems, and the guiding threads of the work. Undoubtedly I have endeavoured to do so, with all fairness to the poet, with what success the reader must judge. But for this very reason, that we have looked somewhat closely into the picture in detail, we are now fairly entitled to fall back a little, and take a survey of its general effect.

With regard to the poet's division of his subject into ten separate but connected poems, instead of concentrating it into one poem, there is, no doubt, something to be said on both sides. His idea has evidently been to select a number of stories out of the abundant materials afforded by the old legends, such, that while each story is complete in itself and of moderate length, the ten together would give the required presentment of Arthur and the Round Table. No doubt he has correctly measured his own genius and poetical strength in this course, and so he has presented us with a gallery of small pictures, instead of one great and commanding picture. This, however, so far, hardly tends to re-assure our doubts as to his general command and grasp of his subject. Had he ~~possessed~~ possessed genius sufficient to weave all these scattered threads into one, by fusing them all together into one grand organic whole, the resulting poem would

have been almost as much superior, we may imagine, to the present collection of poems, as one single fine pearl is to a string of small pearls of the same collective weight. There would have been no practical difficulty in this course on the score of undue interference with the legends themselves; for the poet has actually, as matters now stand, allowed himself such a degree of licence in altering or re-arranging the legends to suit his purpose, as would hardly have been excused in the bolder course. Failing this, he should have contrived, and has no doubt attempted, to weave these independent poems so closely together, by guiding threads of action and of character, as to give them, when viewed from a distance, a general unity and completeness.

But herein now lies the leading deficiency, which indicates, as I venture to think, a want of original breadth of conception.

The idea of making the whole work turn upon the gradual ruin of Arthur's noble design, commencing with the sin of Guinevere, is, no doubt, very well conceived, as imparting a lofty moral tone and purpose to the whole, but if sufficient coherence and resulting unity of effect were to be given by it, it was necessary to make it rule supreme over the whole execution of the work to a much greater extent than has actually been done. Taking the ten Idylls generally very much as

Mr. Tennyson has actually given them, it is not difficult to see how this could have been arranged. In the commencement—the “Coming of Arthur”—we should have had, for instance, a little more personal detail about the three leading characters—Guinevere, Arthur, and Lancelot—shadowing forth, however darkly, the future relations between them. The journey of Guinevere and Lancelot might well have been introduced here at a little more length, instead of being reserved for Guinevere’s mental retrospect in the nunnery. For, by this latter course, the foundation upon which the whole drama should rest is not laid until the work itself is nearly completed.

It would probably have sufficiently foreshadowed, and paved the way for, coming events, if Guinevere had thus, by a slight extra expenditure of power in this first poem, been set before us as the lovely and warm-hearted girl, turning with a sigh from her agreeable riding companion, the handsome and gallant Lancelot, to the colder and more reserved Arthur.

This course would have incidentally afforded the great advantage of introducing into this first poem that element in which at present it is so deficient, namely, human interest and play of character.

In the succeeding poems the relation between ~~Guinevere~~ and Lancelot, if, as we assume, the whole drama is to turn upon it, should not, surely, be left so

much in the background. It need not necessarily be exhibited in any very pronounced or realistic manner, but we should be allowed to obtain more insight into its course and working than is actually afforded us.

For, although, as I have endeavoured to point out, on looking somewhat closely into the poems, it is not usually difficult to see this guiding thread beneath the surface, yet it will generally be allowed that no poet has a right to call upon us to examine his work with a microscope, before we are in a position to appreciate it. He is not of course bound to sacrifice his own poetic and artistic standard to the convenience of the careless and slipshod reader; but, at the same time, poems are made for readers, and not readers for poems,—a principle which, here and elsewhere, Mr. Tennyson seems at times to have forgotten.

Again, the reader's interest should not be expended, and the strength of the poem dissipated, by introducing, in a fragmentary manner, upon the stage, a set of persons who come from nowhere and go no whither, so that their characters and actions are collateral to, rather than part and parcel of, the main stream of the drama.

The poems, "Gareth and Lynette," "Geraint and Enid," "Merlin and Vivien," and notably "~~Pelleas~~" and "Ettarre," appear to err greatly on this side. If

they are to be retained in the series, the poet's genius might fairly be called upon to weave them better into the general web, by linking their characters and fortunes more closely to those of the leading persons in the work.¹

By this course, while leaving the poems, "Elaine," the "Holy Grail," and the "Last Tournament," very much as they stand, we should, by the time we arrive at "Guinevere," have had the way fairly prepared for the catastrophe.

In "Guinevere" the author dismisses the last scene between the Queen and Lancelot, which forms, as we said, something very like the catastrophe of the whole drama, in a score of lines; and he devotes the greater part of the poem to the scene in the nunnery, upon which he spends all his strength.

Now this scene may be impressive in itself and beautifully rendered; but we shall scarcely be able to admit that it is warranted and borne out by the rest of the drama.

Following our principle of going, at first, along with the poet, we said all that we could find to say, in the way of upholding his version of the case, when considering this Idyll. But, now that we are exercising

¹ Compare Mr Devey's remarks on the fragmentary treatment of the subject, "Comp. Est. of Mod. Eng. Poets," pp. 303-5.

an independent judgment, we can hardly resist the conviction that his position is untenable.

✓ Would a passionate and voluptuous woman, after giving all, daring all, and risking all, for the love of one man through all those long years, then turn round and give him up, just when all that the world has to offer is slipping from her grasp, and he only, still faithful and true, is left to her? Would she refuse his proffered asylum from that universal shame and scorn which now, heaped upon them both for a common cause, will tend to draw them closer than ever together? It is incredible.

So, evidently, thought the old author of the legend, for he makes her fly across the sea, as Lancelot proposes, to his Castle of La Joyous Garde, after Lancelot has duly rescued her, at the last moment, from being burnt at the stake, a circumstance which Mr. Tennyson, with an eye to modern ideas of taste and propriety, has of course suppressed.

There is only one source from which she could have derived strength for such a refusal; namely, from a profound faith and religious conviction. From any supposition of this kind our author himself shuts us out. For, when she arrives at the nunnery, we are told that she never

“——— Sought
Wrapt in her grief, for housel or for shrift.”

That is, in an age when confession, and penance, and a blind and unreasoning sacramental system generally, ruled supreme over feminine and all other minds, she will have none of them.

If this view of the case be generally correct, we are brought to this position—that Mr. Tennyson has sacrificed not only his original authorities in the legend, not only the propriety and reality of the situation at the point to which he has himself brought us, and the proper course of the poem here immediately in question,—but the true proportions and legitimate development of the entire drama. And for what has he sacrificed them? In order that he may prepare a platform, in the nunnery scene, whereon to exhibit certain preconceived views and theories of his own as to the line which a noble and high-souled husband might take in dealing with an unfaithful wife.¹ For, of course, had the Queen gone off with Lancelot, there would have been no opportunity for the introduction of a final interview with Arthur.

The fragmentary and partial manner in which the allegorical side of his subject has been dealt with, is another instance, perhaps, of want of breadth and grasp in the general conception of the subject. Without sacrificing the realism of the narrative, of which

¹ Compare the remarks of Mr. Devey, p. 310.

the poet has everywhere been careful, and without going further in the allegorical direction, in any individual poem, than has already been done in two or three of them, it would surely have been quite possible, if any allegory were to be introduced at all, to give a far better, more definite, consistent, and uniform rendering of it, than has actually been done.

No doubt the gradual growth and development of the whole subject, in the poet's mind, after the earlier portions had been given to the world, may be partly accountable for this apparent want of cohesion and consistency. But this does not form any substantial excuse. We can only judge of the finished work as we find it ; and it is the poet's own fault if he choose to publish certain portions without having such a clear and definite programme of the whole subject in his mind, as will enable him afterwards to dovetail in the remainder properly. In any case our position would remain unshaken, as respects the absence of sufficient grasp and breadth of conception in the original design of the work.

The same sort of objection, in a modified shape, holds good as respects the characters in these poems. There is an inconsistency and a want of reality about them. We do not seem to get any real hold of them. But here, that we may not seem to be unfair to the

poet, let us first look at some instances which seem to point rather in the other direction.

The character of Tristram, then, seems to me to be depicted with unusual success. He is a modern creation, it is true, a product of our modern civilization; and we have dined with him, perhaps, before now, or someone very like him, at a West-end club. But, granting this, he is put before us not without some reality and power.

The portrait of Dagonet, again, his dancing friend, is a success. He is drawn with a light but artistic touch, and he is very effective in his way.

Kay, again, the crabbed seneschal, is a capital study. Considering the limited space which he occupies in the picture, he could hardly have been better drawn. And in little side-touches of character the poet is sometimes very happy. Let us glance at the poor maimed churl, who begins his story with a lament over his favourite swine, which he has tended and driven all his life —

“ ‘ My churl, for whom Christ died, what evil beast
Hath drawn his claws athwart thy face? or fiend?
Man, was it, who marr’d heaven’s image in thee thus?’
Then, spluttering thro’ the hedge of splinter’d teeth,
Yet strangers to the tongue, and with blunt stump,
Pitch-blacken’d, sawing the air, said the maim’d churl,
‘ He took *them* and he drove *them* to his tower—
A hundred goodly ones—the Red Knight, he.
Lord, I was tending swine,’ ” &c.

Read again, a few pages further on .—

“ —— Under her black brows a swarthy one
Laugh'd shrilly, crying, ' Praise the patient saints,
Our one white day of Innocence hath past,
Tho' somewhat draggled at the skirt.”

In epithets, and condensed bits of portrait-painting,
the poet is sometimes strong .—

“ —— Modred's narrow, foxy face,
Heart-hiding smile, and grey, persistent eye.”

In dealing with his leading actors, these little
touches of character are sometimes introduced effec-
tively. Let us take an instance or two from “Elaine ”

“ Then the great knight, the darling of the court,
Loved of the loveliest, into that rude hall
Stept with all grace, and not with half disdain
Hid under grace, as in a smaller time,
But kindly man, moving among his kind ”

And again —

“ —— One old dame
Came suddenly on the Queen with the sharp news
She, that had heard the noise of it before,
But sorrowing Lancelot should have stoop'd so low,
Marr'd her friend's point with pale tranquillity.”

But all such sketches and minor touches as these,
however effective and telling in their own way, will not
stand for one moment in the place of a real grasp of,
and masterly insight into, the hidden springs of human,
character and the secret workings of human passion.

You can no more build up a really great character out of any number of them, than you can make a William Pitt out of any number of respectable parish beadles.

A lively chalk and Chinese-white caricature-sketch of a Dagonet may do very well in its own way ; but, when we come to more commanding characters, we want something more than this. We want the master hand. We want that distinct, vivid, and consistent character-painting which nothing but a real insight into character can give.

And so, as we go upwards in the scale, and address ourselves to the more important personages in these poems, the weaker and more unsatisfactory, as I venture to think, do they become, in spite of the greater time and labour bestowed upon them. Kay, as we said, is excellent, Dagonet is clever, Tristram is very fair ; Lancelot and Guinevere are only passable. Lancelot, indeed, has the elements of a very fine character ; but he ought to have been more fully drawn : he is too ideal, and lacks flesh-and-blood reality. Arthur, the ideal hero, is not a real man at all. He is only a voice, a mouthpiece, an automatic transmitting agent, a medium of communication between us and the poet, who stands ever close behind him, and prompts every word that he utters. If it be urged that "L." is ideal ; that the whole history of the Round Table is a romantic, transcendental, and alto-

gether ideal creation ; and that the personages therein may be expected, like allegorical beings, to be ideal personifications rather than flesh and blood human beings : then we say that, if so, the whole work should have been framed in a different spirit in accordance with this view. Mr. Tennyson must not try to enlist our sympathies in favour of the human actions, feelings, and sufferings of living persons , and then, when we try them by a human standard, turn round and say that, after all, they are not men and women, but personifications, ideal forms.

But, when thus tried by a human standard, they seem deficient in life and reality. The poet reserves his power of accurate and realistic description for outward nature, and leaves his men and women somewhat faintly and indistinctly drawn. He sketches them out for us with certain leading characteristics by which we may know them , but does not create, and set fairly before us, a definite and lifelike portrait.

We are brought back again to the point from which we started. The characters of the leading persons, like the general action of the drama, are not evolved from a definite root in the poet's mind, but rather built up piecemeal.

There is, however, this to be said on the poet's side—that the very ideal perfection of the character of Arthur tends to create that negation and absence of

active and pronounced individuality, which is averted, in the case of other and lesser characters, by the play of passion, of ambition, of jealousy, of rivalry, and other such marked and characteristic qualities.¹ Admitting this, the general result still seems rather weak and unsatisfactory.

But we must notice, in fairness to the poet, that, generally speaking, his female characters are more successful. This is only what we should expect after what we have said of the feminine cast of his mind, and his fondness for, and delicacy of touch in handling, that which constitutes such a preponderating element in feminine character and action—namely, the play of feeling, sentiment, sympathy and affection. The two best characters in the whole series, perhaps, are Enid and Vivien, forming contrasted types. Elaine is a pure and tender creation, but simple and childlike; so we shall probably prefer to set Enid over against Vivien as a firmer, deeper, more womanly character.

Turning now to a somewhat different but connected question, a leading point in which we cannot help feeling that there is something wanting in the character of Arthur consists in the absence of any suspicion on his part of his wife's unfaithfulness. At first, no

¹ Compare some remarks in the "Edinburgh Review," No. 268, April, 1870, p. 510.

doubt, this was to be expected from his generous and unsuspecting nature. But afterwards, when the very air he breathed became tainted and poisoned, it is incredible that he should have gone on so long without feeling that there was something wrong. That elevated and refined standard, that moral insight and perception which the poet wishes us to recognize as causing him to dream that—

“——— the bearing of our knights
Tells ever of a manhood less and lower,”

should have made the King feel that all was not sound and right in the womanhood of Guinevere. And this leads us to refer to what seems to be an objection, from the moral side, to his attitude towards his wife in the famous parting scene in “Guinevere.”

Here we find an unwarrantable assumption all through that the whole blame rests with her. Now what are the facts of the case, in the poet's own version of the story, so far as we can gather them from the somewhat vague and shadowy outline which is all that he has vouchsafed us ?

Guinevere, while yet but an ardent and impulsive girl, is brought over by Lancelot to be the wife of a still unknown husband. As yet no sin has been dreamed of, but she naturally turns with regret from the gallant and chivalrous knight who has made the

long journey so pleasant to her, to the colder, more self-contained and passionless Arthur. The foundation-stone of a wall of separation between husband and wife having been thus laid, in a manner for which neither of them can perhaps fairly be blamed, how does Arthur deal with the responsibilities of that married life upon which they have now entered? Rapt in dreams of a transcendental perfection for this all-too-imperfect humanity of ours, he allows the affection and sympathy which should have existed between himself and his wife to go as it were by default. It was no fault of Guinevere's that he had sought her for his wife without having so much as spoken one word to her, or ascertained whether she was or was not of a warm-hearted and impulsive temperament, likely to be chilled or repelled by his own colder nature. It is no fault of hers now that, in his absorbing schemes for his knights and people, he neglects his own household and the wife of his bosom. And so this wall of separation between them grows and strengthens until it becomes an impassable barrier, and they lead a dual instead of a single life. For, that the relations between the three—Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot—should have been what we are told to believe they were during all those long years, is absolutely incredible on any other supposition than that of such a state of isolation and

estrangement between husband and wife. For this Arthur is largely responsible, and it made Guinevere's temptation and Lancelot's opportunity. The King's position, on this view of the case, is therefore untenable. Instead of declaiming against his poor prostrate wife in the convent, from the vantage-ground of a lofty and irreproachable morality, he should rather have knelt down in the dust beside her, and confessed that he himself was partly to blame—that he had never loyally striven to understand her, to meet her just claims, to enter into her wishes, to share her thoughts—in fact, that he had neglected the wife for whose safe custody he was responsible before his God.

The above is the only theory, as it seems to me, by which any reasonable and consistent explanation of the supposed circumstances can be arrived at. But if it be objected that this gives us quite a different view of Arthur's character and position to that intended by the poet, and if it be necessary to re-instate him on that pinnacle of perfection from which we had well-nigh deposed him, then we shall only shift and intensify the difficulty. For, as we whitewash Arthur we must blacken Guinevere. If the husband's love and devotion to his wife, and his moral insight into purity and impurity, truth and falsehood, were all that they should be, then the subtlety and deceit of the *Queen*, who could satisfy all this devotion and this high moral standard,

and yet carry on for years an adulterous intrigue with another, show darker and darker, until we arrive at a pitch of hateful and deliberate wickedness, which, in its turn, is altogether alien to her character as sketched by the poet. And then, too, the lifelong devotion of the high-souled Lancelot to such a woman becomes equally incredible. On the whole, I can see no escape from one of these three alternatives: either the perfection of Arthur is overdrawn; or the wickedness of Guinevere and Lancelot is underdrawn; or, which is nearer the mark, the general plot is extravagant and inconsistent with the characters.

If it be said that it is not fair to criticise the work from this modern standpoint, we can only repeat that as the poet has deliberately chosen to modify and adapt the old legends, so as to give us a modern presentment of his story and characters, he must expect to be judged by a modern standard.

Leaving these more general criticisms let us now look at one or two minor and detailed instances of the working of, as it would seem, the same defect, namely, want of general breadth in conception and consistent evolution of the subject.

Take the following passage in the scene between Tristram and Isolt:—

- “ So, ^{thén}, when both were brought to full accord,
She rose and set before him all he will'd;

And after these had comforted the blood
With meats and wines, and satiated their hearts—
Now talking of their woodland paradise,
The deer, the dews, the fern, the founts, the lawns;
Now mocking at the much ungainliness,
The craven shifts, and long crane legs of Mark—
Then Tristram, laughing, caught the harp and sang," &c.

This passage is pitched in a lighter key than anything that immediately precedes. It serves as a connecting link to carry the reader forward, without any too marked transition, from a somewhat serious discussion to the light lyrical piece which is coming.

But we shall hardly be able to persuade ourselves that the general arrangement is satisfactory. The "comforting of the blood" with meats and wines, is no doubt a very good thing in its way. the deer, the dews, the fern, the founts, the lawns, may be very legitimate subjects of conversation, at a suitable time and place; the craven shifts and long crane legs of Mark are not without their proper interest for the lovers, who are busily engaged in "comforting the blood," with Mark's own meats, and, we doubt not, with a bottle from Mark's own especial bin. But, seriously, without being quite prepared to accuse the poet of an anticlimax, we shall yet scarcely be able to allow, that, when at last the long divided and passionate lovers are re-united, and brought into harmony, the scene before us is a

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sufficient and worthy expression of their reconciled joy.

Now, how does this occur? For we have too high an opinion of the poet's taste and genius easily to persuade ourselves that he would have given us this weak passage at this point without some external reason for it.

The meeting of Tristram and Isolt gave a suitable opportunity, as we saw, for the introduction of a dialogue between them, framed in a somewhat philosophic and analytical spirit. It served to express certain preconceived theories and ideas in the poet's mind, rather than the feelings and thoughts which, viewing the conditions of the situation, might reasonably be assigned to two people meeting in their age and under their circumstances. As soon then as the poet, speaking by the mouths of Tristram and Isolt, has put before us these theories and ideas, he apparently proceeds to consider, not so much what these two people, at the point to which he has now brought them, might fairly be supposed to do or say next, but—how best to introduce one of his favourite enigmatical lyrical pieces before the conclusion of the poem. And so, that he may not jump too suddenly from philosophy to song, he gives us the passage above as a transition stage. If this be so, he first endangers the realism and truth of the general picture, in order to

bring in certain favourite ideas of his own. He then sacrifices the consistency and propriety of the situation, at the point at which he has now arrived, in order to make room for an *independently-conceived* instead of *naturally-evolved* finale to the poem. He thus paves the way for an effective finish to his poem, no doubt, in accordance with his own artistic ideas of light and shadow, by exhibiting his characters in an attitude of careless and unsuspecting gaiety and confidence just before the final catastrophe. But, if this view of the whole case be generally correct, it tends to prove our position, that the characters are treated as puppets, more or less, being clothed with such attributes, and exhibited under such conditions, as will best present a suitable field for the display of the poet's own ideas, or best suit his convenience, by enabling him to present to us some choice poetic morsel, which he has previously manufactured, or sees his way to manufacture. Thus, neither the action of the piece, nor the characters of the actors, are being consistently unfolded in accordance with the requirements of time, place, and circumstance, from a single root, or a central idea, so that the work tends to become a disjointed and inconsistent conglomerate, rather than an organic whole.

I offer these remarks, as they present themselves, while we are considering the work from the artistic standpoint; but would not lay too much stress upon

them, and should hardly quarrel with anyone who might be disposed to pronounce a good deal of this criticism to be overstrained. For, after all, a poet's main object is to amuse, to instruct, to delight his readers ; and, if he succeed in this, as Mr. Tennyson most assuredly does, he may easily be pardoned if he has his own little peculiarities in the method of doing so, and may be allowed to fashion his work according to his own ideas. Still if, herein, he allow himself to deviate from the true canons of art, it seems not unfair, *en passant*, to notice the apparent deviation

Another direction in which it appears that our author is open to a charge of sacrificing the true and proper unfolding of his subject for a secondary object is in his fondness for an episodical and fragmentary arrangement and division of his poems. He thereby seems to make unwarrantable demands upon his reader's patience and attention, besides indicating, as I venture to think, his own deficiency in general breadth of artistic perception. That same narrowness of view which originally caused him to break up his whole subject into separate and ill-connected poems, now leads him to break up the individual poems into separate and ill-connected portions.

Thus, to take one out of several instances, in the "Last Tournament," we have, at first, eight or ten lines to introduce us to a scene of no apparent im-

portance, a chance *rencontre* between the skipping fool and Tristram ; then a retrospect thirteen or fourteen pages long, giving us the whole history of the carcanet and the tournament, before we return to the trivial scene from which we started. Here the poet seems to have gone out of his way to cut up his poem, and to make an extra demand upon the reader's patience and attention, for no apparent reason. No striking scene, no life-size portrait of hero or heroine, is to be set before us, in the foreground of the picture, with the view of filling in the details subsequently. And the long retrospect, comprising such a large portion of the whole poem, inevitably imparts a fragmentary character, tending to weaken its unity, and impair its general effect. In "Enid," again, is a crucial instance, which we have already noticed. We are first introduced to the heroine in her married life ; and shortly afterwards we have the entire history of the previous courtship and matrimony, forming, no doubt, the prettiest and most interesting part of the poem. But the general result is that the whole piece is cut up into fragmentary portions, for the sake of bringing into greater prominence one single scene. In this scene the heroine extracts, with a sigh, a faded silk dress from the wardrobe or cabinet in which it had been laid-up-in-ordinary, upon which we are made to look back in the story for thirty or forty

pages, ostensibly that we may get the history of this dress. Now the heroine's care of it, and association of ideas connected with it, may constitute a pretty little sentimental picture in themselves, but I venture to think that a greater breadth of view would have led the poet to recognize that it was not worth while, for the sake of such a picture, to endanger the unity, the dignity, and the general effect of a poem which forms one act in a great tragical drama on which he has expended so much genius and power, together with the labour of half a lifetime.

We must, however, notice, in fairness, that the poet's arrangement serves to bring into greater prominence, by setting in the fore-front of the picture, that jealousy of Geraint, on which the whole poem is intended to hinge. On this account it would seem, that had the subsequent retrospect been confined to a moderate length, instead of comprising such a large portion of the poem, the resulting arrangement would have been more suitable and defensible.

We have remarked, more than once, that the poet is generally careful not to sacrifice the realism and truthfulness of his pictures to the hidden allegorical significance.

There is one case, however, where it is at least possible, that the general design of a poem has been subordinated to the allegory. In "Gareth and Lynette"

a difficulty, which probably strikes most readers at once, is the incredible character of the "kitchen-knave" part of the story, as resulting from the mother's command. Much allowance must, no doubt, be made for the extravagances and impossibilities which occur in the legendary lore of a romantic and uncritical age. We would not therefore notice any such minor difficulties in connection with this story as this,—that if the King did not know his own nephew, the brothers, Modred and Gawain, would recognize him and reveal the secret. All such secondary improbabilities may well be allowed in a legendary story of this kind, which must not be examined too critically. But I venture to think that if any story is to carry our sympathies with it, and satisfy the true canons of art, it must be true, in its essence, to human nature, which is one and the same in every age. And it is impossible to imagine that any mother, out of pure love and excessive fondness for her son, would doom him to make his entrance into the world under such conditions as these.

This "kitchen-knave" part of the plot, however, becomes more intelligible, if we understand it as leading up to the allegory. The struggle upon which Gareth is about to enter represents, as we saw, the war of the soul in its progress through time. The sensuous soul, under the guise of Lynette, accompanies Gareth and overcomes by his aid. We see then that victorious

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faith is denoted by his warfare, and humility by his humble origin. This accounts for the poet's, and therefore for the mother's, anxiety to get him into the kitchen. If it be said that this is too far fetched, and that the association of the lovely and angelic form of humility with the grimy pots and pans would only lead us from the sublime to the ridiculous, we can only throw the blame upon the poet. Regard it how we will, there is a strong element of the ludicrous in the whole affair, which we shall not easily get rid of. The poet, then, is in this dilemma, that, if his allegory is to be consistently applied, as above, to explain Gareth's sojourn in the kitchen, he has sacrificed the general truthfulness and probability of his story to it. But if not, then he has deliberately, and for no compelling cause at all, selected for his poem a story with an incredible plot.

Leaving now these more general considerations, let us notice, in conclusion, that, in a few instances, the poet's love of natural history has led him to injure, rather than enhance, the effect of his descriptions, by introducing somewhat ill-timed illustrations from it. Take the following .—

“ ———— Never man rejoiced
More than Geraint to see her thus attired ;
And glancing all at once as keenly at her,
As careful robins eye the delver's toil,
Made her cheek burn, and either eyelid fall.”

Now the inquisitive robin, waiting for his worm, may be a very handsome perky little fellow in himself; and in his own proper time and place we have not one word to say against him. But the question is, is he in his right place on the present occasion? With all deference to the poet's highly cultivated taste, I yet venture to think that he is not. Surely the general effect of the situation, wherein the ardent lover is, or is supposed to be, dying to see the result of his test upon his loved one, is in no way enhanced but rather lowered, and our attention unnecessarily diverted by the introduction of a trivial image like this. How can the poet ask us to leave the lovers, at this critical moment, and go off to watch the robin's eagerness in quest of his worm, unless he is prepared to maintain that the instincts of the lower creation are worthy to be set side by side with the workings of the human affections.

Mr Tennyson, however, is so much in love with his simile, that he repeats it verbatim further on in the same poem, and under conditions to which much the same remarks are applicable.

Once more let us look at the application of a simile, to which we have elsewhere referred :—

“ — Arthur deigned not use of word or sword,
But let the drunkard, as he stretch'd from horse
To strike him, overbalancing his bulk,

Down from the causeway heavily to the swamp
Fall, as the crest of some slow-arching wave,
Heard in dead night along that table-shore,
Drops flat, and after the great waters break
Whitening for half a league, and thin themselves,
Far over sands marbled with moon and cloud,
From less and less to nothing; thus he fell
Head-heavy "

Now, no one will be hardy enough to deny the excellence of this fine simile in itself; but, here again, the question is, is it in its right place? Such similes as this do not grow wild on the poetic hedge; and it vexes us that Mr Tennyson should not have found a worthier place for it, instead of wasting it over a description of a drunken man tumbling helplessly from his horse. One would almost imagine that the poet has had it lying idle, ready manufactured, in his note-book for a long time, and now seizes the first occasion which affords a decent excuse for its introduction without much consideration of its real appropriateness.

In all these cases the missing element, on the poet's part, seems to be the want of a broad view of his subject, the absence of a real and masterly grasp of it—of its worth, its capacities, its true proportions, and its legitimate development,—as compared with his own poetic strength and resources.



CHAPTER XVII.

ON CERTAIN MINOR PECULIARITIES OF STYLE AND METRE IN THE IDYLLS.



ONE of the leading minor excellences, observable in these poems, is the admirable English in which they are written

The language is always clear and to the point, generally vigorous and telling, not seldom keen, incisive, even brilliant. The poet gives us vernacular English with a noticeably small proportion of words of classical origin, and with a general avoidance of foreign importations of all kinds.¹ The number of long words of Latin or Greek derivation, and of more modern introduction into the language, to be found in the Idylls, is particularly small, if indeed any such occur at all.

Mr. Tennyson does not, like some authors; allow

¹ Compare "Edinburgh Review," July, 1859, p. 249

himself to take verbal or grammatical liberties with the language, to revive obsolete words or coin new ones, to any noticeable extent. There is, however, one direction in which he has gone so far beyond his predecessors, as almost to open up a new field. This is in his compound epithets, which are so numerous and varied as to constitute quite a feature in his style.

As might be expected, he draws largely upon his close and varied acquaintance with outward nature, in the process of their manufacture.

Let us glance at the following :—

“ A lodge of intertwisted *beechen-boughs*,
Furze-cramm'd and *bracken-rooft* ”

“ The *wide-wing'd* sunset of the misty marsh.”

“ A *death-dumb*, *autumn-dripping* gloom.”

“ A *slender-shafted* pine ”

“ *Heather-scented* air.

“ ————— A brow,
May-blossom, and a cheek of *apple-blossom*,
Hawk-eyes, and lightly was her slender nose
Tip-tilted, like the petal of a flower ”

“ Myriads of *topaz-lights* and *jacinth-work* ”

“ *Many-knotted* water-flags ”

“ ————— Entering thus,
Right o'er a mount of *newly-fallen* stones,
The *dusky-rafter'd*, *many-cobweb'd* hall.”

"A gloom of *stubborn-shafted* oaks."

"The *tiny-trumpeting* gnat."

"A *ruby-circled* neck."

It would be easy to multiply further instances.

The poet is sometimes so much in love with these epithets that he even sacrifices the smoothness and rhythm of his verse to them. This we should hardly have expected from him, as the perfection of his versification is usually conspicuous.

Take the following :—

"——— To sweep
In *ever-highering* eagle-circles up"

"Low down through *villain kitchen-vassalage*"

"——— Some prodigious tale
Of knights who sliced a *red life-bubbling* way
Through twenty folds of twisted dragon."

"——— A silk pavilion gay with gold
In streaks and rays, and *all Lent-lily in hue*."

"—— Vows—' I am woodman of the woods,
And hear the *garnet-headed yaffingale*
Mock them."

Here the versification is unusually laboured, turgid, and rough ; a result for which the compound epithets are mainly responsible.

It may be said, no doubt, that this effect is designed

by the poet, in order to meet his ideas of the harmony of sound and sense. But it seems more than doubtful whether the general effect is not artificial and unsatisfactory.

The poet does not often indulge in mannerisms, tricks of style, and forced or unusual modes of expression. There are, however, a few points which a careful student can scarcely fail to notice. One of these is his fondness for repetitions where any marked effect is to be created.—

“——— Their *Abbess* died.

Then she, for her good deeds and her pure life
And for the power of ministration in her,
And likewise for the high rank she had borne,
Was chosen *Abbess*, there, an *Abbess*, lived
For three brief years, and there, an *Abbess*, past
To where, beyond these voices, there is peace.”

“——— Moving with me night and day,

Fainter by day, but always in the night
Blood-red, and sliding down the blacken'd marsh
Blood-red, and on the naked mountain-top
Blood-red, and in the sleeping mere below
Blood-red”

“*Storm* at the top—and, when we gain'd it, *storm*
Round us, and death.”

In his pathetic passages our author sometimes appeals to our sympathies, with a most marked and peculiar effect, by this kind of emphatic repetition.

Thus, when Enid is lamenting over her husband :—

“O, noble breast, and all puissant arms,
Am *I the cause, I the poor cause* that men
Reproach you?”

And, again, where the husband laments over the wife,
a little further on :—

“———— In spite of all my care,
For all my pains, poor man, *for all my pains*,
She is not faithful to me.”

Similarly in the subsequent beautiful passage in
which the poet moralizes on the general situation .—

“O purblind race of miserable men,
How many among us at this very hour
Do forge a lifelong trouble for ourselves
By taking true for false or false for true,
Here, through the feeble twilight of this world
Groping, *how many*, until we pass and reach
That other, where we see as we are seen !”

Compare, if we may leave the Idylls for a moment,
a beautiful and touching passage in “Aylmer’s
Field” :—

“———— So they talked,
Poor children, for their comfort ; the wind blew,
The rain of heaven, and their own bitter tears,
Tears and the careless rain of heaven, mixt
Upon their faces, as they kiss’d each other
In darkness, and above them roar’d the pine.”

A striking feature in these poems is the constant use of alliterations and play upon sounds generally. This meets us continually. The most noticeable cases are generally in the initial letters of noun and verb, describing similar or connected actions—

“— On the spike that split the mother's heart
Spitting the child.”

“———— What other fire than he,
Whereby the blood beats and the blossom blows,
And the sea rolls, and all the world is warmed ”

It would be easy to select numbers of such isolated cases, which would catch the eye of every reader. But in order to get a truer measure of the extent to which these agreements of sounds sometimes prevail, even where at first sight we might not notice them, we might analyze carefully a single page from Lancelot's description of his adventures in the “Holy Grail.”

This would tend to convince us that Mr. Tennyson is a most careful student of the laws of euphony. By years of study and practice in versification his ear has been so trained to the harmonies of sound as to lead to a most remarkable phonetic agreement, by a process of more, or less unconscious selection and euphonious grouping of his words. The admitted harmony and perfection of his versification generally is largely due to a close observance of these harmonies of sound.

As another instance of our poet's mannerism, we might quote the introductions to the speeches in the "Passing of Arthur" with the stereotyped epithet applied to Bedivere, framed on the well-known model of the "Iliad," as every school-boy will recognize.

The poet gave a certain quaint and archaic flavour to his original fragment, the "Morte d'Arthur," by adopting this course, and, in order to be consistent, he has carried it out in the later additions to the poem. But in the rest of the Idylls he has dropped it, and commenced his speeches in a more lively and conversational manner. This was very necessary, as the general character of the utterances themselves is much too modernized to admit of such antiquated introductions without a standing discord, in addition to the wearisome iteration which they would have entailed.

Let us now look at our poet's versification from the side of metre and rhythm.

The general metrical type upon which the Idylls are framed is, of course, the Iambic. But the poet by no means ties himself down to a rigid adherence to this normal pattern. On the contrary, wherever it is desirable to produce a more striking, emphatic, lively or solemn effect, or only to vary the monotony of the verse, he introduces other feet of two syllables or of three, in place of the normal iambus, and frequently in a very telling manner.

Let us take a few instances ; and first for the sudden or startling effects produced by a trochee, which reverses the usual flow of the metre, and pulls us up, as it were, to gaze at some sudden apparition, or listen to some startling sound—

"*Into* | the hall | *stagger'd*, | his visage ribb'd
From ear to ear with dog-whip wheals."

"*Out of* | the dark, | *just as* | the lips had touch'd,
Behind him rose a shadow and a shriek."

"*Out of* | the city a blast of music peal'd."

Similarly for

Recoil—

"*Back, as* | a hand that pushes through the leaf."

"*Back from* | the gate, | *started* | the three."

Command—

"*'Slay, then,'* | he shriek'd, ' my will is to be slain ' "

"*Rise, weak* | ling ; I am Lancelot ; say thy say."

"*Tell thou* | the king and all his liars."

"*See to* | the foe within."

Appeal—

"*Would thy* | have risen against me in their blood
At the last day?"

Entreaty—

"*Make me* | thy knight, Sir King."

"*Pray for* | my soul, more things are wrought by prayer."

Now let us look at some instances of the introduction of a third syllable into the foot. This again usually lends emphasis, by causing us to pause upon the word or words in question, or it may be used to form a suitable break in the flow of the metre, at the introduction of a quotation, or the resumption of the narrative after a quotation, &c.

I take the following instances from two consecutive pages of "Pelleas and Ettarre" :—

"————— He saw
High up in heaven the hall that Merlin built
Blackening | against the dead-green stripes of even "

"————— Gazing at a star
And mar | *velling what* | it was · on whom the boy,
Across the silent seeded meadow-grass
Borne, clash'd · and Lance | *lot saying*, | 'What name
hast thou
That ridest here so blindly and so hard ?'
'I have no name,' | *he shouted*, | 'a scourge am I
To lash the treasons of the Table Round.'
'Yea, but thy name ?' | '*I have ma* | ny names,' he cried.
'*I am wrath* | and shame and hate and evil fame,
And like a poi | *sonous wind* | I pass to blast
And blaze the crime of Lancelot and the queen !'
'First over me,' said Lancelot, 'shalt thou pass !'

'Fight therefore,' yell'd the other, and either knight
 Drew back a space, and when they closed, at once
 The weary steed of Pelleas floun | *dering flung* |
 His rider, who call'd out from the dark field,
 | ' *Thou art false* | as hell slay me . I have no sword ! "

The division of the sentences, the agreement of antecedent and relative clauses, and the general arrangement and punctuation, are most artistically contrived, so as to harmonize with and assist these metrical changes in producing the desired result.

Let us glance at a descriptive passage from "Guinevere :"—

" There rode an armed warrior to the doors
 A mur | *muring whis* | per thro' the nunnery ran ;
 Then on | *a sudden* | a cry, ' The King ' She sat
Stiff-stricken | listening, but when armed feet
Thro' the | long gallery from the outer doors
Rang com | ing, prone from off her seat she fell,
 And grovell'd with her face against the floor .
There with | her milk-white arms and shadowy hair
 She made her face a darkness from the King :
 And in the darkness heard his armed feet
Pause by | her , then came silence, then a voice,
 Monotonous, and hollow like a ghost's
 Denouncing judgment, but tho' changed the King's."

Or notice the peculiar position and accentuation of the word *Sounds* in the following beautiful passage :—

" Then' from the dawn it seem'd there came but faint,
 As from beyond the limit of the world,

Like the last echo borne of a great cry,
| Sounds, as | if some fair city were one voice
Around a king returning from his wars."

Similarly—

"——— She did not see the face
Which then was as an angel's, but she saw,
Wet with the mists and smitten by the light,
The dragon of the great Pendragonship
Blaze, ma | king all the night a steam of fire."

Lastly, let us notice the effect produced by the unusual introduction of a long syllable at the commencement of each of five consecutive lines in the following exquisite passage :—

"——— Yearnings ? ay, for hour by hour,
O, sweeter than all memories of thee,
Deeper than any longings after thee,
Seem'd those far rolling, westward-smiling seas
Watch'd from this tower "

In these and many other passages our poet's subtle and artistic command of rhythm and metre are conspicuous.





CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.



UR studies are nearly over. It only remains that we say a few words in conclusion upon some points which have not hitherto been touched upon, or else by way of recapitulation and gathering up of scattered threads of argument. And first as to the general point of view from which we have here approached the whole subject. In this we have mainly followed the example set us by our author himself.

It has been said in the Introductory Chapter that the poet is a student; his work everywhere tells of careful and patient design and elaboration. He is also an artist: his refined and fastidious taste and perception are everywhere conspicuous. This being so, it follows naturally that these poems are emphatic-

ally an art-study ; and it is from this side mainly that we have here regarded them.

Thus it was no part of my design to weary the reader with long historical disquisitions on that vast field of early literature with which these Idylls are connected ; although a study of it would properly be involved in any exhaustive discussion of the general subject. Such a study of the origin and growth of the Arthurian and collateral traditions may be most interesting and important in its own proper place ; but we have preferred here to take the poems mainly as they stand, and to study them as an art-creation in the completed shape in which they are brought before us. And herein, as was said, the poet has set us the example. Whether it be from a poetic genius calm and measured in character, rather than fiery or impetuous ; or from a somewhat contracted range, perhaps, of sympathy and enthusiasm ; or from a dispassionate and critical artistic taste , there is observable a certain coldness in our poet's whole treatment of his subject. He is never hurried away by a vivid realization of his theme into passionate expression, forgetful of, and untrammelled by, artistic proprieties and balanced proportions. He is never himself carried away, and so he cannot expect to carry us away. He looks at his own work to a certain extent *ab extrâ* with calm artistic eye ; and, conse-

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quently, we also have been disposed to regard it calmly as an art-creation, rather than as a living reality of human passion or human suffering, before which criticism pauses and yields place to sympathetic emotion.

We have spoken before of the high moral tone and purpose which pervades these poems. And we have said that they constitute a study of human failure. *Failure*, disappointment, ruin, is the burden of the whole; and looked at from this point of view the poems constitute one long commentary on that profoundest of profound words—"The creature was made subject to vanity."

Vanity, in this its widest and deepest significance, is shadowed forth, as the argument of the coming work, in the prophetic and riddling triplets of the gifted seer in the earliest poem :—

"A young man will be wiser by-and-by,"

as also, in the second Idyll, in Arthur's own statement of the essential condition necessary for his success, with the implied possibility of failure —

"So my knighthood keep the vows they swore."

Vanity is proclaimed by all Enid's long, miserable, hopeless wanderings with her suspicion-infected lord; and by the exulting harlot-shriek with which Vivien

leaves the betrayed and entrapped Merlin. It is in the pang that goes through the heart of the noble Lancelot, when the woman whom he has loved so long and so well flings his nine-years-fought-for diamonds into the river ; while the sweet maiden who loved him so truly passes there beneath his eyes in the stillness of death. It finds voice in Arthur's mournful summing-up of the achievements of the Holy Quest :—

“Was I too dark a prophet when I said
To those who went upon the Holy Quest,
That most of them would follow wandering fires
Lost in the quagmire? lost to me and gone ”

It sounds in the indignant and anguished cry of the deceived Pelleas .—

“Would they have risen against me in their blood
At the last day? I might have answered them,
Even before high God.”

It is breathed in Lancelot's sigh at the “Last Tournament :”—

“The glory of our Round Table is no more ”

It is sounded in Isolt's ears with the cold-hearted wish of her inconstant lover :—

“May God be with thee, sweet, when old and grey
And past desire !”

and it is crashed into the brain of Tristram with the

avenging axe of Mark. We hear it in the sorrowful words of the King in the nunnery :—

“Thou hast not made my life so sweet to me
That I, the King, should greatly care to live ;
For thou hast spoilt the purpose of my life ;”

and in the last mournful cry of Bedivere :—

“Now the whole Round Table is dissolved,
Which was an image of the mighty world,
And I, the last, go forth companionless,
And the days darken round me, and the years,
Among new men, strange faces, other minds ”

All through we have set before us a study of human failure—of the disappointment of the noblest ambition, the marring of the highest effort, the ruin of the brightest prospect—through the unhallowed working of human passion.

In “*Enid*” Guinevere’s sin was but a whisper breathed upon the peace, the joy, and the brightness of the healthful scene to which the two first Idylls had introduced us, but yet there came with it a baneful suspicion, threatening to poison and mar the pure fountains of all wedded happiness. In “*Vivien*” the whisper has become a storm. That secret sin of Guinevere and Lancelot is, as it were, reproduced. It leaves the darkness in which they fondly thought that it was buried ; it stalks boldly forth into the light of day, hideous and unhallowed—a fell Juggernaut-car-

progress of evil, of which Vivien appears before our eyes the Satan-energized propheticess. In the succeeding poems we see this monstrous Shape rolling ever remorselessly onward, and crushing beneath its wheels not only its own blinded devotees—its Tristrams—but innocent bystanders, the sweet and tender Elaine, the pure-minded and chivalrous Pelleas.

Yet, though the evil is thus put fairly before us, in its blackest blackness, with all its subtle and Satanic working, with all its spreading poison and never-ending mischief and ruin, it is remarkable that we never lose our sympathy for the chief sinners.¹ One cold and cruel form, it is true, the poet shows us, separate and panelled off from the general picture, that we may not be without a proper presentment of the evil in its more personal manifestation, in the utter ruin and degradation of a human soul when brought fairly under its influence; and from Vivien we can only turn with loathing, as from some bright and glittering, but deadly and hateful reptile. But from the chief actors, the original authors of the mischief, we are never thus bidden to withhold our sympathy, in spite of the unsparing exposure of the ruin which they work. On the contrary, we are given to understand

¹ Compare some remarks in the "Edinburgh Review," April, 1870, p. 538.

that the end of all is for each of them peaceful and holy. In this setting forth of the sanctity of the marriage tie, with the tremendous and far-reaching results of its violation, combined with sorrow, compassion, and hope for the unhappy violators, the poet has been most successful.

For this more sympathetic and compassionate aspect of his subject has not been gained by any lack of due justice and severity towards the sinner any more than by a want of truth and faithfulness in the picture of the sin. As we said at the close of the Introductory Chapter, an avenging Nemesis of retribution has everywhere followed upon the crime. Even while their guilt is still undiscovered it becomes so hateful to Guinevere and Lancelot, by its manifested results, and by the poisonous atmosphere of deceit and treachery with which it surrounds them, that of their own deliberate act they are minded to break the chain. That is to say, their own guilt had found them out even before it was found out by others. There is room for repentance at last, it is true, but it is a repentance of tears and shame; and before it is found there is a wholesome experience to be gone through of the abundant crop of poisonous and piercing thorns by which the tempting but forbidden flower and fruit were guarded.

Again, though there is failure and even ruin in this

world for the innocent, the pure, the high-souled, and the noble, yet are we left at last with the feeling that "wisdom is justified of her children."

Arthur is, as he should be, the crowning instance of this. His life has been one long experience of failure, the rain, to refer once more to the riddling triplets of the seer, having quite got the better of the sun. Yet he departs in a solemn peace —

"I have lived my life, and that which I have done
May He within Himself make pure."

This is higher than Dido's famous utterance, of which the opening words remind us —

"Vixi et quem dederat cursum fortuna peregi."

inasmuch as, in his case, the lines have been traced out for him by duty, instead of, as in hers, by fortune. And whether he come again or no we know that he is not without his due and appropriate welcome in that far-off land.

"Then from the dawn it seem'd there came but faint,
As from beyond the limit of the world,
Like the last echo borne of a great cry,
Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice
Around a king returning from his wars."

Elaine, again, passes away from the scene. Her poor tender little heart has "dashed itself against the desolations of the world," and been all-untimely

broken to pieces. Yet in her darkest hour, we are made to feel that her lot is far preferable to that of the hardened and polluted Vivien, even though we should take *her* in her hour of fancied triumph and glory.

Elaine's utterances are those of a noble soul—satisfied with following everywhere, in its affections, as in all else, the highest; and careless, comparatively, of the actual result, as to success or failure, in this dim and uncertain world.

She looks, first and chiefly, at Lancelot, the peerless one, whom she loves, and whom to have loved, she says, cannot fail to dignify and ennoble her own smaller and slighter life. That thought comes first, and herself and her own fortunes, good or bad, remain in the background.

In "Vivien and Tristram" we see only a selfish and carnal materialism, they look from first to last at self.

But Vivien is lower and grosser than Tristram. She deliberately prefers the evil path; whereas Tristram is not without a feeling after a higher and better order of things, from which he knows himself to have fallen.

Before concluding, we ought perhaps to say a word upon a point which has probably struck most thoughtful readers of the Idylls—namely, the analogy between

the life of the ideal King here, who struggles all his life against the evil of the world, and "passes to come again," and that highest life and lifelong struggle, recorded in the Gospels, of Him who also passed to come again. The question naturally arises—how far is this analogy intentional and to be considered as an integral part of the poet's design, so that there is a hidden and tacit reference to Scripture throughout. There are certainly some passages in the poems which seem to support such a view, such as—

"Follow the deer? *follow the Christ, the King.*"

So again a little later—

"Not proven, who swept the dust of ruin'd Rome
From off the threshold of the realm, and crush'd
The idolaters, and made the people free?
Who should be King save *him who makes us free?*"

Still, though the poet has thus distinctly recognized the analogy, he has yet been careful, I think, to leave it only an analogy, and has not sought to establish any absolute typical or symbolic identification. All such correspondence as there may be he has left to tell its own tale and find its own level, so to speak, without going one step out of his way in an attempt to perfect or complete it. There is also this to be considered, that the higher and truer any human life may be the more resemblance with there necessarily

be between it and that highest One which is *the* Truth and *the* Life. The higher, therefore, the ideal which the poet has set before us, the more has he tended to work on parallel lines with Scripture. But as lines when parallel never meet, so has there, as it seems, been here also a parallelism, but no actual coincidence.

Our task is over. If it be true, as, probably, most judicious readers will allow, that a thorough and faithful study in detail of a single important and original work is worth more than the careless and hasty perusal of half a library, then will the time and labour which we have here bestowed on a somewhat close study of these poems be in no way wasted. And I am not without hopes that this essay, by drawing attention to the subject, may conduce to a due and proper appreciation of these poems, even if it be only as a beacon-light, by its errors and mistakes. If we have been enabled here to set in a clearer light any of those numerous merits and perfections which might possibly have escaped the notice of the general reader, our labours will be so far successful. If in some cases we have ventured upon adverse criticism, it has been in good faith, and with no shadow of a desire to undervalue the real beauty and excellence of the entire work. It is quite possible that a wider artistic perception and truer critical insight would show some of this criticism to be mistaken or one-sided.

Whether this be so or no, a great poet like Mr. Tennyson can well afford to regard with the utmost equanimity all such efforts whether hostile or favourable, being well assured that his work will last long after such "studies" as these are buried in oblivion.

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